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Woman's Revenge.

By Mrs. J. F. REICHHARD,

Author of "Mr. Clifton of Barrington,"
"Hilliard Hall," Etc., Etc

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A WOMAN'S REVENGE;

OR,

The Mystery of the Black Pines.

A POPULAR NOVEL.

BY

MRS. J. F. REICHHARD,

Author of "Mr. Clifton of Barrington," Etc., Etc.

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A WOMAN'S REVENGE.

CHAPTER I.

THE great white spires of the grand cathedral stood out in bold relief, against a dark blue sky, studded with innumerable stars. It was a December night, clear, but moonless, a keen frosty air swept with a hissing whistle through the white spires and played fitfully about them.

Of the persons who passed continually up and down the street, few turned their eyes up to that grand monument of architectural skill, so dignified, so grand in its aspect, and yet standing so grim in the darkness.

Yet there was one individual who appeared to be heedless of the cold biting air, in his admiration of the magnificent structure upon which he fixed his eyes. As the man, closely buttoned up in a thick great-coat, the upstanding collar of which reached his ears, and ran like a boundary wall round his mouth, stood with folded arms regarding the building, so far as his sense of architectural beauty and fitness went, the building might as well have been the Tombs.

At this moment a distant bell tolled the hour of nine, and as the last beat was vibrating through the air he muttered:

"That will do for me though I can't see a clock. I must look about me now, for she is sure to be here. It

would not be wise in me to miss her, or even to keep her waiting for me, she is so very haughty and—hah!"

A woman's hand was laid upon his wrist.

"Oscar Ross," she whispered, "you are punctual. Lead the way, I will follow you—not a word; I have a suspicion that we are watched. A hint is enough for you. Quick, away with you."

"Oh, ah! ha! I understand; but what if I am too nimble for you?"

"Have no thought of me," responded the woman. "For your life don't look back, you will not escape my vigilance."

"No," he muttered, "that I am well aware of."

He advanced with a hesitating step toward the church. Suddenly he quickened his pace to a brisk walk, and directed his steps toward Broadway, intent upon the purpose he had in hand, wondering if the strange woman he had met by appointment was still in his rear, for he had been light of foot. He ran suddenly against a man.

An angry oath escaped the lips of both, and each bent upon the other a fierce look. There was a simultaneous cry of recognition.

"Oscar Ross! by heaven!" cried the other man with a sudden shout of vengeance. "Scoundrel, at last I have you." As he muttered the last words he flung himself upon Ross, but the latter, with a desperate exertion of strength, threw him off, and leaping in turn upon him, inflicted a blow upon his head which felled him to the ground; then he fled.

Fled, with the hoarse cries of "Police!" and yells of "Stop thief!" filling the air.

Fled, with the hurried tramp of many feet ringing like the terrible beats of an alarm-bell in his ears.

He continued the rapidity of his movements until, by many an anxious backward gaze, he felt assured he might safely make for an asylum at hand.

At the door of a small house, in a dark street, he paused for an instant before entering; then he pushed open the door, rushed into an unlighted passage and groped his way up a staircase until he reached the top flight; dashing open the door of an apartment, he flung it to and then threw himself, panting, upon a chair.

A slight shriek, as of a frightened one at his abrupt entrance, caught his ear on entering the room; but he took no notice of it. He pressed his clenched hand to his side to stay the rapid palpitations of his heart, and closed his eyes while he essayed to recover the breath expended in his sharp run.

As soon as he could articulate, several terrible oaths escaped his lips.

"I am the most unfortunate devil," he muttered, "to run against him alive, and he ought to be dead, if any man ought. What in the name of Satan, am I to do now?"

A low, but clear, female voice said, at his shoulder:

"What has happened?"

"Happened!" he echoed; "the devil and all—don't ask any questions, it would be a riddle to you if I were to tell you that I came face to face with a dead man, and fled like a dear from him."

"Or like a hound!" muttered the same voice, in a low contemptuous tone.

He turned around fiercely to the speaker only to change his angry words to an exclamation of surprise.

Before him stood a tall girl, with a pale face, bright

black eyes, jet black hair. She was wrapped in a large shawl of shepherd's plaid, and she had her hat on. Her right hand rested on a parcel which stood upon a small table.

For a moment Oscar's breath seemed quite as spent as when exhausted by his long run; but, quickly recovering himself, he said to her:

"What is all this pantomime? Why are you dressed up in this way—what's that parcel for?"

"I am going, Oscar Ross."

"Going? The devil you are! going where?"

"Anywhere, so that I leave you."

Oscar grated his teeth.

"I must be in a dream," he growled. "Three such events could not in actual life so tread on each others' heels. But she! I will deal with her first. Take off your hat and shawl and put the bundle away."

"No! I will not. I have counted the cost of my decision—I leave you, and to-night."

"It takes two parties to make a contract," exclaimed Oscar, advancing to the door; turning the key in the lock he put it in his pocket.

As he did so the girl sprang to the window. Throwing it open she leaped on to the sill.

Oscar uttered a yell of horror.

The girl turned her pale face and gleaming eyes upon him. She pointed to the door. "Unlock it!" she exclaimed with stern brevity.

"Grace, girl, what would you do?" gasped Oscar, shivering with fright.

"Leap out, unless you unlock the door."

He knew the girl too well; and with trembling eagerness, he obeyed her.

"Place the key upon my bundle, and retire to the

corner of the room or the work is but half done. It is but a leap, and I have little heart to refrain from taking it."

He tottered rather than walked to the table, laid the key where she had indicated and shrank to the wall.

Then in a moment, she was in the centre of the room, and took the key.

As she did so Oscar Ross darted to the window and secured it.

"Stop!" he cried with a loud voice, as she proceeded to quit the room. "One word with you before you leave."

She turned in the doorway, and silently waited what he had to say.

"You have an untamed, stubborn self-will; but let me tell you, however, just now it is convenient to me to be quit of you. Still you are my daughter!"

"I do not believe it."

"No? Who placed you when a child at school? Whose name have you borne from your earliest recollection? Mine—Ross. Who has brought you hither, who has kept you ever since? I, Oscar Ross, your father."

"Not my father; oh no! not my father. I could not despise, or so loathe you if you were."

"Despise and loathe me!" reiterated Ross, fiercely. "Why should you do this? I have been kind to you. I tell you, girl, your mother—a more bright and beautiful woman than you ever will be—thought differently."

"Tell me of her?" cried the girl, with a sudden and passionate earnestness. "Tell me of her, of whom I have never heard, whom I have only seen in my

dreams, tell me of her, and I will stand in patient listening till the dawn"

"You had better choose a time more fitting for family revelations, than this!" said a voice, just behind Grace Ross.

She turned swiftly, and beheld a woman thickly veiled, standing in the doorway.

Grace retreated a few paces into the room, followed by the strange visitor.

"Mildred, by the Lord Harry!" ejaculated Ross, with astonishment.

The newcomer closed the door behind her and said, addressing the man:

"Oscar Ross, I have kept my word. You have not escaped my vigilance."

"I did not expect that I would," returned Ross.

"Nor will you that of others, if you remain here. It was my intention to have entered into a new arrangement with you respecting this girl; but one glimpse of him you have to-night encountered, and, further, the knowledge that at this moment the police are on your track, have induced me to change my plan, and suddenly to adopt another. Have you any other mode of escape save by the outer door below?"

"Yes, by the way of the roofs," exclaimed Ross, in an agitated and excited manner.

"Avail yourself at once and should you get safely away write to me. You know where. It is important that we should meet again, and soon, for there is much to do that must be done. Go! leave the girl to me."

Ross was evidently awaiting only the signal to depart. He nodded to his guest and passed out of the door, leaped up the stairs and disappeared over the roofs of the adjoining houses.

As the sound of his retreating footsteps died away, she who had counselled flight advanced and closed the door.

Almost at the same moment the girl, who had watched with silent earnest intent the departure of Oscar Ross, muttered with emotion:

"He is not my father."

Then the strange visitor flung up her veil, and the two face to face scanned each other with an eager scrutiny.

"Grace Ross, you do not know me but I do you. You have seen me before though you cannot remember that event. Know me now as Mildred Dupont, your friend so long as you may be entitled to call me such."

"You say that you know me; am I that man's daughter?"

She pointed in the direction which Ross had taken.

"Ask your earliest recollections," was the curt reply.

"The man who has left us is a reprobate, a drunkard, and a thief."

"No?"

"He has no honor."

"Beware how you speak of him!"

"I fear nothing from him! from you! from any one on earth! I have had my burden chained to me from childhood, I can endure anything now; else had I scarcely dared to trust myself a stranger to its ways, into the world, and strive for my share of its gifts, so that I might live. What signifies it now, if that it be unshackled, free, independent of the down-trodden control I have only known."

A shade passed over the features of Mildred Dupont.

"I have met you opportunely;" she said. "You

stand on the brink of fate, a gulf yawning on either side—death, or dishonor."

"The first, perhaps—the last, never!" cried Grace, with flashing eyes. "If I had thought grief or misery were eternal unless compromised by dishonor, I had perished long since. You do not know me, woman."

"I shall know you better now. You were about to leave Ross. Will you come with me?"

"Where?"

"Where, at least, you will be free to go or stay when you grow weary of it, or from any other cause."

"That man Ross—will he be there?"

"Ross? no, certainly not."

"I will go with you. I care for naught else," cried Grace, quickly.

"Come at once, then," said Mildred, with sudden hastiness of manner.

She led the way down the rickety stairs as she spoke, and Grace followed her closely, having by her direction, extinguished the lights.

They had scarcely passed into the street when they became conscious of the approach of a mob of persons following a half-dozen policemen. Mildred seized Grace by the wrist.

"They are in pursuit of Ross. Quick, this way; quick, girl, quick; your safety from the jaws of prison depends on your speed."

Bewildered, Grace Ross followed the counsel of her companion, and hurried in the opposite direction to that in which the mob was advancing.

Onward they hurried, Mildred apparently mistress of her route; her young companion indifferent to the way selected, or to any urgency for speed.

A cab passing, Mildred stopped it and hired it.

Placing Grace in it, she, in a low tone, directed the man whither to drive, and then following in, drew up the windows and pulled down the blinds. The driver, obeying her instructions, dashed away at a rapid pace. They entered a brilliantly lighted street, when the cab made a momentary pause.

The roll of carriages and other noises, caused Mildred to raise the blind of one of the windows nearest to an elegant mansion where a grand ball was given that night.

One carriage is yielding up its freight of youth and beauty.

A young handsomely dressed man gives his arm to a fair girl, whose head sparkles with jewels, and upon whose shoulder hangs an elegant white opera cloak; he assists her to alight, and conducts her into the mansion.

The cab driver lashes his horses into a gallop, and leaves the scene behind.

"How beautiful!" exclaimed Grace with a sigh, as she fell back in her seat.

"Did you see that gentleman's face?" asked Mildred, eagerly.

"I did."

"And will you remember it?"

"I shall never forget it."

Mildred was silent until the cab stopped at the corner of a fashionable street, the cab discharged. Mildred hastened on up the street until she reached the entrance of a splendid mansion, turning down to a side entrance. She seized Grace by the hand, conducted her with cautious steps over the graveled paths, until she reached a flight of steps, leading to the breakfast-room of the handsome mansion.

These she ascended; and noiselessly opening the door leading to the stone steps she entered the room, proceeded slowly and silently over the richly carpeted floor to a door, and opening it without a sound, passed through into a passage, and so as it appeared to Grace, up a narrow flight of stairs, and thence into a room.

She fastened the door, then, advancing to the chandelier, turned it up to its full height until the room was filled with light. Grace pressed her hands over her eyes, they were so dazzled.

When she again removed them, she was startled to find standing before her a woman, who was in appearance wholly the opposite to her who had brought her there, save in the face; there was no alteration in that.

Mildred Dupont had thrown aside her loose cloak, and old-fashioned hat with its thick veil, and the somewhat crouching gait she had assumed. She now appeared in a rich crimson velvet ball dress, her white arms and neck contrasting brilliantly with the deep superb color of her attire.

Grace could scarcely credit the testimony of her eyes, and but for the face—that face which underwent no change—she would have believed that she was in the presence of an apparition.

Mildred raised her finger to prevent Grace speaking, and herself, in a low tone, exclaimed:

"Reserve your wonder; this is but the first of a series of surprises in store for you."

Then she removed Grace's hat and shawl, and surveyed her attentively in her plain attire.

"You are good-looking," said she, after her inspection. "You will be extremely handsome, if there is any virtue in a well-ordered toilet. Of that hereafter.

Now mark me, and heed me; I am one of the invited guests to that ball to which we observed so many carriages driving as we came here; to that mansion, at the door of which we saw a face I have bidden you to remember. I will go there to-night. You will remain here alone, locked in this room."

She opened, as she spoke, the door of a narrow room, adjoining that which they were in.

"You see it contains a bed and all the appointments of a sleeping-room, and you may be comfortable in it though it is small."

"But why locked in?" asked Grace, with a suspicious air.

"For many reasons," was the reply; "not one of which I can give you. Let this suffice. You will be in the possession of the key, and you will find bolts upon the door inside. I use the precaution to prevent intrusion upon you, not to confine you against your will. I will release you in the morning, and then we will determine upon our future course. Time presses, I must leave you now. Retire; be silent as the grave until I tap three times on your door in the morning. Fear not that any one will attempt to come near you, for the door is kept locked and the key is always in my possession. Good-night."

Confused and staggered by all that had transpired in the last few hours Grace, in silence obeyed, and entering the small chamber, closed the door. As she was about to lock it, she opened it and once more confronted the singular woman who had brought her there.

Now she saw a change upon those features—a strange, unearthly, indescribable expression.

Was it joy? exultation? triumph?—what? Grace could not tell. Her flesh crawled over her frame.

"Tell me!" she said, in accents of intense earnestness. "You knew me in years past, what am I to you?"

Mildred clutched her wrist, and in a whisper, whose hissing sound filled the room, replied:

"Some families have great secrets—You are mine!"

CHAPTER II.

THE first owner of Falcon Manor was wise in his generation; he built his dwelling in a sequestered spot overlooking the beautiful Hudson.

Fully alive to the value of peace, he left an injunction to those who succeeded him, "Not to interfere in the affairs of the nation—to attend to the cultivation and improvement of the estate—to care for themselves, for it was Heaven that cared for all."

His successors followed his counsel and profited by it.

Like all buildings of such ancient parentage, it stood upon a hill, and commanded a fair and noble prospect. Glancing over fertile valleys, and rich pastures, it rested upon that glorious river—which, for picturesque beauty, from its source to its confluence, surely stands second to none in the world—the Hudson. Beyond was the luxuriant purple Catskill mountains.

Although the estate was called Falcon Manor it was generally known as the Black Pines.

Falcon Manor looks picturesque as it stands, backed by an extensive plantation of magnificent black pines.

It was current for miles away, among those who dwelt in the vicinity, by the name it had won from a dark deed committed in the park by one of the Fal-

cons in times long past. A fair girl's fame and life, and a near relative's blood, were mingled in the wild tale of crime; and it was further stated, the deed had never yet been atoned.

It was said the shadow of the guilt yet rested on the house. The brightest and best of its race had been smitten down always in the moment of exaltation.

The present possessor, Milroy Falcon, passed his days rather in secluded retirement than in pursuing the ordinary routine of a country gentleman's life.

Yet twice during the year he visited New York, and each time remained for a short term at the town house.

He was not misanthropical, sullen, reserved, or freezingly distant. To all by whom he was surrounded he was an enigma.

Save one!

* * * * *

One beautiful wintry afternoon, as the sun was declining early, Milroy Falcon stood silently gazing through the panes of an antique window. In the room sat two ladies, one young and beautiful, the other, older, handsome and stately.

"Do you not weary of this dull place, Ora, and long to join again in the gaieties of New York?"

The young girl started from her reverie; a slight flush suffused her cheek as she replied hurriedly:

"No, indeed, my dear madame; no, I am not dull, nor fatigued with the quiet seclusion, as you so frequently term it, which we enjoy here. See how beautiful are the hills, the dales, the river; then what charming walks through the parks, and through the woods, and the black pines——"

"Who spoke of the black pines?" cried Milroy Fal-

con sharply, breaking from his fit of abstraction, and turning toward them with a strange wildness in his eyes.

Ora rose to her feet, and regarded him in surprise.

"Milroy! our dear little guest was deep in her praises of Falcon Manor and you have interrupted her."

She fixed ber bright eyes on him as she spoke, and the clear tones of her voice rang in his ears.

In an instant he was composed and calm.

"A thousand pardons; continue, Ora, you will find me an interested listener."

"I intended only to say that within this fine old building, and abroad in the park and woods, there is so much to delight and interest, that one ought never to be weary here."

"Never!" said Milroy Falcon, relapsing into a reverie again.

"So you are fond of walking in the woods, Ora?"

"They are so grand," she replied.

"Alone of course?" observed her friend, without a feature being moved.

Ora looked at her inquiringly. "I think that I prefer a companion; but you do not rise early, and Roderick is away with his tiresome gun, so I am obliged to walk alone."

"Suppose Wilton Granger had been a guest here, would he have served as a companion in your walks in the deep old woods?"

Ora blushed. "There would have been no better prospect for me," she answered. "I still should have to wander alone, Wilton would have been sure to have been dragged into the woods by Roderick and his odious gun."

"What about Roderick?" said a voice behind them.

They turned, a fine handsome young man stood near Ora.

"What! scandalizing and traducing me? O Mildred, I expected better treatment at your hands," he exclaimed, with a laugh.

"It was your sister, not I," replied Mildred; "but you know the adage, old as the hills yonder, and you have added another proof to the many of its truths."

"Unfairly treated again, by Jove!" he exclaimed, still laughing. "Why, I entered the room, boldly, and openly enough I imagined; but no! there stood Mr. Falcon, with his eyes fixed upon the black pines——"

"Who taunts me with those hated black pines, do you, sir?" cried Milroy Falcon, suddenly wheeling round, and advancing with fierceness to the young man, who with astonishment, stepped back.

"Milroy Falcon!" cried Mildred, "you forget our young guest is yet a stranger, and is not likely, at first, to rightly comprehend your jests."

"Jests!" echoed Milroy Falcon sharply, and then suddenly burst into a laugh. "True, true," he said.

Before there was time to reply, or for the electrified Roderick to recover his composure, and endeavor to discover the joke, the sound of carriage wheels, driving sharply over the hard drive leading up to the house, struck on their ears.

"Visitors!" cried Milroy, hastily; "I can receive no one—I will receive no one to day."

"You forget," said Mildred, "our orphan cousin, was to have been here to-day, this must be her arrival. A near relative of Milroy's and mine," she added, turning to Roderick and Ora. "Poor girl! left an orphan; rich enough, but poor, in having lost both parents.

You will receive her kindly for my sake, will you not, Ora?"

Ora assured her she would most gladly; while Roderick offered at once to rush off to the entrance and receive her.

"No," said Mildred, "I will bring her here—or we will meet at dinner."

"We will meet at dinner," exclaimed Milroy, abruptly; and, with a bow to his guests, quitted the room.

Mildred, with a few hurried words to her guests, hastened to receive her expected visitors.

"This is an awfully slow place, Ora."

"It is a grandly beautiful place, but——"

"The people—that is Milroy—and—and my fingers were so cold, I couldn't pull the trigger; I wonder I didn't shoot one of the dogs when my gun fell."

Ora looked up in wonder at this incoherence, and was startled to find Milroy walking slowly into the room again, with his arms folded on his breast, wrapped in profound meditation. He stationed himself at the window, and gazed out upon the old wood, which, in the swiftly approaching shades of night, was blending into one cold, grey, solid mass.

Beckoning to Ora to follow him, Roderick, with noiseless step, retreated from the room. She with a lingering glance at Milroy slowly followed, Roderick closing the door after them without a sound.

With a few words of wonder they separated to dress for dinner.

When the hour for dinner arrived, Milroy and Mildred, accompanied by the young girl who had arrived an hour ago, entered the dining-room the same moment,

but by different doors; Mildred presented the young girl to Milroy.

As his hand came in contact with hers, her voice reached his ears. He instantly fastened his eyes upon her face while his own became at once of livid whiteness and his whole frame shook.

It was but a momentary spasm, the struggle passed away, and he made a few remarks to her upon the loneliness of her journey, and his hope that she would be cheerful and happy in his house.

The girl bowed with silent dignity; and then Mildred turned and introduced her to Roderick, and Ora D'Olier, as her cousin Grace Montrose.

It was Grace Ross. She was pale but fairer, her eyes brighter, her lips more deliciously red; her hair beautiful and glossy, her rich but neat dress set off her elegant form to the fullest advantage.

The dinner passed off more cheerfully than it had done since Roderick and his sister had been at the Manor. Over the dessert, Roderick suddenly exclaimed:

"This is New Year's Eve!"

A silence as of death followed; Milroy set down the glass he was putting to his lips untasted, and fell back in his chair.

The face of Mildred assumed an unnatural whiteness, as though the words had thrilled the marrow in her bones.

Instinctively the eyes of their guests were turned in amazement on them.

Grace knew that the words had some mysterious effect, and she broke the silence. "I welcome it!" she exclaimed, in clear tones. "It is the day of the funeral of buried tortures and signified griefs; it is

the advent of a time which may bring brightness and joy, to compensate for those memories of the past, which sear the brain and the heart, while they do nothing to alter the fiat of inevitable destiny. It was a happy symbol to my thinking which represented the new year as a butterfly springing from its untenable tomb, the shell of the old once-crawling chrysalis. At last it has wings and the free unimpeded air, with liberty to roam, and the world all before it to begin its new life in."

Roderick regarded her with earnestness. "You can have had but few tortures, Miss Montrose," said he.

"School-girls have their tortures. They would be women when they are children, and the shackles of their school duties are viewed as tortures intolerable."

Grace had always more love for the power to roam over the woods, than she had for the trammels of education.

"Nevertheless, Miss Montrose has turned her bondage to advantage!" exclaimed Roderick; then he added, hastily, "I mentioned the fact of this being New Year's Eve, because I was about to propose that we should welcome in the new year with becoming honors in a novel way. The night is bright and clear, and there is a hill just beyond the plantation of black pines——"

"Pardon me!" exclaimed Mildred, in haste interrupting him, her eyes flashing as they turned on Milroy Falcon, who suddenly pressed his marble white hand to his brow, as though a sudden pain distressed him. "This is an old house," she added, in a lower tone. "It has its superstitions, and there is one connected with this night. For the sake of the weak, of the credulous of the household, who cherish idle traditions pertain-

ing to those of an old race, we always retire early on this night, so that absurd stories told by terrified people may, if possible, be prevented and die out."

This changed the conversation, but it was carried on with less animation than before.

Suddenly Milroy exclaimed, unconscious of the presence of those around him: "Will this day never, never end?"

Mildred at once rose up instantly, and accompanied by Grace and Ora, left the room, leaving Milroy and Roderick alone.

The clock in the tower chimed the hour of ten. As the last note died away, Milroy hastily arose, and bade Roderick good-night and left; and Roderick heard his footsteps rapidly retreat along the corridor, and as the footsteps ceased he heard a door close loudly. He left his wine and sought the ladies, hoping to have a chance to talk to Grace and have some music; but found that they had retired for the night; and with a feeling of dissatisfaction he made for his own room.

Grace was alone with Mildred in her dressing-room.

"You have acquitted yourself admirably," observed Mildred; "perhaps, however, it is due to your natural character to pass such an ordeal with ease. There are others which you may have to undergo of far more difficulty, you must nerve yourself to encounter them, for they may happen at any moment. Forget the name of Ross, and remember only that you are a Montrose."

"Am I not?" asked Grace, haughtily

"You are what I say you are," returned Mildred, almost imperiously; "you must content yourself to be so. Who you will prove to be is a matter for some distant day; now you are a Montrose."

The tower clock chimed sonorously in the still air.

"What hour is that?" exclaimed Mildred, with sudden quickness.

"A quarter of twelve," replied Grace, looking at her watch.

Taking up a small lamp in her hand, Mildred beckoned Grace to follow her.

By a small door at the end of the room, they passed into a narrow passage and then up a flight of stairs which terminated at a narrow corridor. Mildred passed along this, closely followed by Grace, and then ascended a winding stairway. When they reached the top of the stairs they entered a small room. She placed her lamp so the light would be hidden, and drawing Grace to the window they looked out.

The night was clear and bright. The sky was studded with myriads of glittering stars, and the country far away could be seen looking solemnly dark, and still, and calm, as though plunged in soulless repose.

"What is the meaning of a visit to this place at this late hour?" asked Grace, shuddering.

"Be silent!" was the reply.

Presently Mildred grasped her by the wrist, and pointed into the park beneath. Following the direction with her eyes, Grace saw the dark figure of a man flit rapidly across the white surface, and then disappear in the plantation of the black pines.

Mildred opened the window; the night was very still, and the cold was intense.

Suddenly a fierce gust of wind rushed whistling and moaning past the tower. At the same instant Grace's heart was chilled by the sudden chiming of the clock above them.

It tolled the hour of twelve.

It was as though the solemn peal would never end. As the last stroke died away Mildred clutched her by the hand and said, in a startling voice:

"Hark!"

A wild cry rose from the plantation of the black pines; it made Grace's blood run cold.

The same strange expression shot over the features of Mildred Dupont, as when in New York as she stood outside the narrow bedroom door.

She whispered in Grace's ear:

"This, too, is a secret of our house."

CHAPTER III.

OSCAR ROSS having safely avoided the police, pursued a circuitous way until he had gained the Thieves' Sanctuary in the lower part of the city; having secured a room not too much exposed to the public, or even private scrutiny, he remained closely within his kennel for more than a week.

One night he emerged from his hiding-place and made his way along the river front until he got in the neighborhood of the Brooklyn bridge.

In a small street in that densely populated district, there was a store where might be had anything or everything in a small way. The proprietor called himself a general dealer, and was fairly entitled to the appellation, for he sold bread, boots, eggs, hats, coal, wood, potatoes, butter and tea. In fact there were few things Hook Flint did not sell.

Before this store Oscar Ross paused, and looked about him; then he quietly entered and stood still while several customers were served.

"Now, sir? what will you have?"

Ross glanced at the speaker, and saw that she was a bright eyed, pretty faced girl. He smiled blandly, and in a low tone replied:

"I've called for a letter."

"A quarter of butter," responded the girl, quickly. He smiled fascinatingly and pinched her soft round chin.

"A letter, my precious—a letter, my sweet puss!"

The girl, who happened to have a broad-bladed, wooden butter-knife in her hand, dealt Oscar Ross a blow on the cheek with it so sharp that the sound might have been heard many doors off.

"Don't you do that again!"

"And don't you do that again you vixen!" roared Ross.

Startled by the report of the butter-knife upon Ross's cheek, the proprietor of the store made his appearance from a small room, back of the store, and inquired the cause of the disturbance.

"Nothing," said Ross, "nothing, Hook, my merchant prince, but that your daughter Fan, tried to kill a fly upon my cheek, and—at least hit him. You have a letter for me, 'O. R.,' to be called for here?"

"Why!" cried the girl, suddenly bursting into a laugh, "is that you, Mr. Ross? You look so scrubby and grubby, I didn't know you."

"I am Oscar Ross, at your service," responded Ross, echoing her laugh; "just now, I admit, under a cloud."

"Of dust!" added Fan, repeating her laugh; and then adding with a graver face: "Seriously, I hope I didn't hurt you, it was all playfulness, you know."

"Clearly," replied Ross, with a slight cough. "I would only suggest that, content with a sample of your

playfulness, I shall not attempt to obtain an example of your earnestness."

"That I suppose is your letter," exclaimed Hook Flint, handing him one with the address written in a woman's neat hand.

Ross nodded, and took, almost snatched it, from him. He broke the seal, and carefully taking possession of an enclosure, he read the contents of the letter.

A smile passed over his features as he went on reading, and an exclamation of satisfaction burst from his lips as he concluded it.

"The cloud has become a speck on the horizon," he said; "it will soon disappear altogether. The grub, Fan, is about to become a golden butterfly."

"Not a moment too soon," she answered, as she turned to address herself to a customer, who had just entered.

"Hook Flint, I have something to say to you. I can make it worth your while to listen to me—but not here."

"Where?" inquired Hook, with a blank look.

"Not here—in this store," returned Ross sharply, and pointing to the back room; "in there, up-stairs, any place where no other ears than yours hear what I shall say to you."

Hook Flint mused for a moment. Presently he said:

"You don't look as though you could make it worth my while to listen to you."

"Granted, O keen-sighted physiognomist!" replied Ross; "but I have the wherewithal in my hand, if I have it not on my back, though I will have it there soon. Behold, sceptic, and let your doubts be scared away."

He flashed before the eyes of Hook Flint a bank-note of considerable value, and that individual, filled with emotion at the sight, satisfying himself that it was genuine, led the way to a small sanctum, the door of which was in a very narrow, dark passage, and its situation perceptible only to the experienced hand of the general dealer.

The door closed with a spring, and Hook then said that they were alone. He asked what he would receive for such service as might be required of him.

"Sensible infant!" replied Ross. "It is wise in you, but know that the aid and service I will require of you, will be multifarious, varying in its value as it becomes difficult or light; your reward will, therefore, be rateably in accordance with the small or great importance of your assistance. Terms cash—no credit required, how will that suit you?"

"Well, yes," answered Hook; "only which of us is to fix the price? That's a strong point, don't you know."

"Sometimes you—sometimes your humblest of servants—myself," responded Ross. "Should we differ upon the amount in such cases—well, if we cannot settle it by arrangement, the contract shall terminate by mutual consent."

"That will suit," said Hook; "and now what first?"

"First, then, you will provide me with a warm supper, then lodgings for the night. To-morrow you will secure me a gentlemanly outfit such as none but the most wealthy attire themselves in. So you will understand that you will be required, in the commencement of your engagement, to act, perhaps, at a moment's notice; you will have your instructions given to you.

We are employed as the instruments of a woman's revenge. More, it is in vain to seek to know."

"I am to understand that you and I are to be employed as the instruments of a woman's revenge!" exclaimed Hook Flint, as Ross ceased.

"Sage bird," returned his companion; "you have hit the blot. You are so good at guessing—guess now that I need some supper, and quickly."

"You shall have it; I will speak at once to Fan about it, and also concerning your bed. Oh, you may depend upon my serving you well, friend Ross!" muttered Hook Flint, as he left the room. "To be the minister to a rich woman's revenge, is to be an officer on good salary. That will pay!"

"Mildred is playing a deep game," Ross said, reflectively; "but I don't quite see her object, nor what is to come of it. Well, what matters; I shall make a good round sum out of it. What a pity we should be so near related. I believe she is passionately in love with me; I might for that have had her and her money. How I would have spent it! I possess all the elements requisite for the disbursement of wealth, and what am I—um? Fortune, you jade, you deserve to be an old spiteful maid. To me and for me, I suppose you will remain, as you always have been, accursed misfortune. Mildred! wonderful and extraordinary woman, arbitress of my fate, provider of my funds, and general conductor of mine on the way to Inferno, you are my only staff, my sheet-anchor, my——"

His soliloquy was here cut short by the arrival of his supper. He turned with a smile upon his grim face, to greet the attendant, who he was convinced was the pretty Fan; but was disconcerted to find in her place a bony woman, verging on seventy, with a countenance

of the hue of mahogany, and features very strongly furrowed, as though hard work and sore affliction had been through her long life struggling for the right to slay her; but not having succeeded, they had left fearful traces of their incessant contention upon her visage.

Oscar at once turned his eyes from her to his supper, and made a few remarks, to which she gave no reply, even after they had been twice repeated. It was not until a fourth time he yelled what he had to say to her in her ear, that she acquainted him with the fact that she was very deaf, and that she had been appointed by Mr. Flint to be his attendant during his stay.

"Sha'n't trouble you much," grunted Ross; and then muttered, "Hook thinks Fan's a moth, and me a flame; very well, more ways to catch moths than by scorching their wings. Cunning Hook! artful child! two to one I will come out ahead."

He dispatched his supper in silence, retiring in disgust to a narrow bed in a small room, which was not fragrant with the odor of a thousand flowers—unless they were camomile flowers—and with some words upon his lips respecting Hook Flint, which was not a pure prayer for his future welfare, he sunk into a profound sleep.

It was at least two hours past midnight when his door stealthily opened, and his elderly attendant stole, with noiseless step, cautiously into his room.

She held in her hand a lighted candle, the light of which she cautiously shaded with her hand as she advanced into the room. She made her way directly to the bed where Ross was sleeping, and cast a sharp glance at his face. It was composed and still, save that the mouth was open, and sounds came therefrom indicative of the strength of his slumbers.

Seemingly satisfied with her investigation, the old woman looked round the room, and then made toward the chair upon which Ross had thrown his shabby clothes. These she carefully gathered up in her arms, and retreated from the room with her prize.

She descended the stairs, and passing along a narrow passage, paused before an abutment in the wall. A spring touched, revealed an entrance, through which she passed, and closed again, leaving her in a confined apartment alone with Hook Flint. The room, naturally of small limit, was densely stored with packages; there was a profuse quantity of plate; trays, salvers, knives, forks, spoons, in gold and silver, together with trinkets of all descriptions; packages of silks and satins—it is not possible to enumerate the contents which crammed the shelves and floor of this storeroom. They were the produce of many a burglary, and have come into the possession of Hook Flint, by purchase, at a very heavy discount from their true value. Upon a charcoal fire was a crucible, into which Hook, busily engaged in removing precious stones from bracelets, rings, and other ornaments, was from time to time throwing fragments of the precious metal. He looked up as the woman entered, and gathering up the brilliants and other precious stones on the table, put them into a small iron casket.

He was much attached to the old woman—a confidential servant of long standing—but he would not have trusted her in sight an inch from his elbow, much less out of it.

"Well, Meg, my woman," he exclaimed, in an undertone, "have you got what I sent you for?"

"Here they are," she replied, producing Ross's clothes. "I don't know what's inside the pockets; the

rags themselves ain't worth a nickel—not as rags they ain't."

"Give them to me! give them to me! I don't want you to value them, that ain't what I want!" he exclaimed; and, then carefully opening it, he examined the bank-note and an order upon a firm in Wall Street to pay from time to time such sums as the bearer, mentioned by name, might require.

Having made a copy of the draft, and a memorandum of the date and number of the note, Hook refolded it, and replaced it in the pocket again.

"Ain't a going to give him the bank-note back again, are you?" exclaimed the woman, regarding Hook with an air of surprise.

He waved his hand for her to keep silent. Not satisfied with rummaging the pockets, he felt the coat all over, and in the collar detected some substance thicker than the cloth. He proceeded closely to examine it, and found a most ingeniously contrived pocket; he dived quickly into its contents with eager eyes.

"All gold! All gold! All gold!"

"Where?" cried the old woman, with a gluck like an old hen. "I don't see the ghost of a dime!"

"Peace, woman! you know nothing. I've got here what is worth many a thousand, if well managed—a bank which will always honor the demand—a great family secret. Hush! not a word."

He placed the paper in a drawer and the pocket-book returned to the collar of the coat; and Hook gave a grin of satisfaction as he was about to hand the clothes back to Meg.

At this moment several packages piled in a corner of the room, fell to the floor with a startling noise.

Meg uttered a shriek; and Hook, with a countenance

aghast, sprang to his feet, and gazed upon the disordered heap which had fallen down.

He caught up a big knife and motioned to the woman to bring a light.

"I—I—I don't like," gasped the old hag, "'tain't nobody—it's a ghost."

"Idiot," growled Hook, and dashed to the spot where the pile had tumbled down. He snatched the light out of Meg's trembling hand, and searched every spot he could get at very closely, without detecting anyone.

"Thought so—badly packed; they must be stacked better when they are put up again. Shan't do it to-night—the morning will do."

"Told you it was a ghost," said Meg, with chattering teeth.

"The things tumbled over by themselves," said Hook, snappishly.

"Ah, you may say so, but you thought somebody was there!"

"I did!" ejaculated Hook.

"Who?"

"Fan!" he exclaimed, in a whisper.

"What would you have done to her if it had been?" gasped the woman.

"Cut her throat," he replied, in the same low but frightful tone.

The old woman shivered.

"Why, the gal's abed and asleep long ago!" she exclaimed, in a half-suffocated tone.

"I'm not so sure about that," returned Hook; "I think she has taken to prying. If I only catch her once at it—only once—only once—she'll do it no more. Here, take Ross's clothes back again, and put

them where you found them. Mind, don't wake him, or he will not stand about throttling you, especially if he finds you with his clothes in your hands."

The old woman nodded, and left the room; while Hook, with a grim smile on his face, resumed his task.

The morning broke brightly; and about nine o'clock the sun struggled through the dirty window panes of Ross's room. Ross gradually opened his eyes and gazed with a bewildered look about him. After a momentary effort he recognized the place.

He seized his clothes, and hastily dressed himself. Taking up a small bell which stood upon the table, he rang it sharply.

He rang it again—and again—and again—and if the last peal had not brought Meg, the bell stood a fair chance of being shattered to fragments.

As soon as the gaunt old woman presented herself he pounced upon her, and dragged her into the centre of the room, and bawled in her ear:

"Breakfast, and Hook Flint!"

Then he bundled her out of the room, at a swift pace; and returning flung himself upon a chair.

The breakfast made its appearance and so did Hook Flint. Immediately the old woman left the room, Ross said with a grunt: "Don't like the accommodations."

"What is wrong?" asked Hook.

"Everything; the room is cramped and dirty; and the attendant——"

"Meg—very good servant, a most excellent old woman," interposed Hook.

"I have no notion, I assure you, of perishing by malaria, or by the equally unsatisfactory fate of a broken blood vessel."

Ross spoke gravely, and his features wore a very serious look. Hook believed that Ross spoke with sincerity. Now he had no wish to part company with him at present, at all events; he therefore promised that an alteration should be made, and that Fan should be substituted for Meg.

As Ross's only object in complaining was to obtain Fan for an attendant, he ate his breakfast with apparent gusto.

A barber was next introduced, and received particular instructions regarding the work required of him; under which Ross would have moustache, and a carefully trimmed, pointed beard, *à la* Vandyke. He hoped to present, in about ten days, the appearance of a distinguished foreigner.

When he had been shaved and trimmed, and when, by the tailor's aid, he was dressed in elegant and well-fitting clothes, his appearance presented a startling contrast to that which his arrival at the establishment of Hook Flint had greeted the eyes of Fan.

Oscar Ross possessed a remarkably handsome face, in which were deeply set, full, clear, dark brown eyes, with full lids. Although past forty, he looked younger, now that the appliances of the tailor and the hairdresser had been enlisted in his service; and gifted with an oily tongue, and unscrupulous callous unconscientiousness, he was well fitted to obtain a powerful control over an ignorant or yielding person.

Fan had some slight previous acquaintance with him as a visitor to her father—always upon some secret business; but she had never seen him to such advantage as now dressed, as he was in the highest style of fashion.

It was not without its influence upon Fan. His gaze

upon her, whenever, according to the new arrangement, she entered the room, was tender and earnest, only too earnest, and the pressure of his fingers whenever they came by accident or design in contact with hers, was too decided not to be noticed or misunderstood.

It is hard for a woman who is subjected to a course of warm attention, an artillery of loving glances, to believe that there is not real love at the foundation of it all.

Fan thought nothing of Ross when she first saw him —less when she smacked his face with the butter-knife; but she was now struck by his appearance, and she felt flattered by the manner in which he addressed himself to her. He treated her in no boisterous manner at first, but by degrees he obtained possession of her hand, and at length she only reluctantly withdrew it. His arm was permitted to encircle her waist; and he was not reproved when he drew her gently to his breast, and pressed his lips to her forehead.

So passed two weeks, and the time arrived for Oscar Ross to take his departure. On the day he was to leave he took the opportunity of being alone with Fan to take his farewell of, and to arrange a mode of communication with her, to be known but by themselves alone.

"And do you really love me?" asked Fan, looking fondly up into his eyes, after some ardent protestations by him.

Ross attested his love for her by an oath.

"And will you always continue to love me, Oscar?" she asked, with an imploring murmur.

"I am not a white-faced boy, Fan, my darling," he said, "to change at every new and pretty face I see,

So long as you love me, and prove your affection for me, so long will I continue to adore you."

The girl's eyes swam with tears.

"I will one day prove my love for you, Oscar," she said, with a sudden earnestness. "I have discovered something which will one day be of the greatest importance to you, and I will reveal it to you."

"What is it? what is it? quick, Fan, dearest. Your father will be here in a few moments, and then it will be too late."

"No," she said hurriedly, "not now—at the proper time I will be prepared. Hush! I hear my father's footsteps. Good-bye, Oscar, don't forget me, write as soon as you can; you know where."

Oscar snatched a kiss which was passionately returned, and the girl ran out of the room.

She had not been gone a minute when Hook made his appearance, dressed in black with a white necktie such as clergymen wear.

"Excellent! excellent!" cried Oscar, surveying him.

"All is ready," returned Hook, "the cab is around the corner."

"Let us be off," said Ross, seizing his new hat. "Before I return here do let that ancient Mohawk squaw try the effect of a little eau de cologne upon this locality."

Hook, with a spiteful grin at the remark, quitted the room after him. Meg on tip-toe followed him closely In the dark passage she gripped him by the wrist.

"Fan!" she whispered.

"Well!" he replied, impatiently.

"He has obtained the key of her heart," she said.

"I will through her, make him my slave, and through him compel her to do whatever I choose, at which now

she rebels. Oh, I did not let her attend him for nothing, Meg, my woman! When I want to end the trifling—as soon as it ceases to be of use to me, that will be—I will cut his picture out of her heart. But watch her, Meg, watch her closely. I have lately had my doubts about her; watch her, watch her!"

He overtook Ross, and conducting him by a private passage—instead of passing through the shop, where Fan, with eyes red with violent weeping, was serving customers of all kinds—they passed out into another street, and jumping into a cab, drove rapidly away.

CHAPTER IV.

WHITNEY FALCON BURDELL claimed descent from the common ancestor of the Falcons. It was said that he only lacked certain proofs to complete and perfect his right to Falcon Manor. and all its lands, possessions, etc., as the true lineal; and it was known that he openly declared himself to be the oldest living representative of the eldest branch of that family, although Milroy Falcon had succeeded to the estates as heir-at-law.

But the grievance had been one of long standing; and it was rumored by those acquainted with the antecedents of the families, that the deed which gave to Falcon Manor the title of the Black Pines was one in which both families were mixed up; Whitney Falcon Burdell's being the only suffering and aggrieved branch.

The feud, long existing, was not now healed; Whitney Burdell knew very little, personally, of the present occupier of Falcon Manor, nor did he seek to improve his knowledge. He was content to remain a passive

enemy of the usurping family, as he styled Milroy Falcon, and to await the possibility of the latter dying childless; for, in such a case, his branch, beyond dispute, succeeded to the family estates.

Not that Whitney Falcon Burdell needed it; for he had an ample fortune and a fine property also. But he coveted it. The impression that it legitimately belonged to him made him wish for it, though he made no movement to obtain it.

Haughty and proud as he was, he would have welcomed with warm familiarity the humblest individual who could have furnished him with any of the missing documents, which would open up the way to win the Falcon estates to himself.

This weakness was known to one who knows how to make use of it.

Whitney Burdell had been married the second time. By his first wife he had a son, who is now at West Point, known among his friends as the genial happy lieutenant, Ray Burdell. His daughter, Dottie, had finished her education, and had made her *début* into society, and society had pronounced her a beauty.

Yet she had a loving nature, with a large proportion of sweet humility.

Mrs. Bertha Burdell, Dottie's step-mother, was but a very few years older than she; she was handsome, beautiful, graceful and imperial.

She had married Whitney Burdell for money and position in the aristocratic world.

"I have made a sacrifice," she said when alone one day. "He expects me to make a continuous self-abnegation of myself to him." The cry soon went up from her heart, why—oh, why did she marry a man old enough to be her father! the answer fraught with bitterness

came back to her, money and social position; and were they worth the sacrifice she had made? So far they had not, but time would tell the rest.

"Dottie, did you see Roderick D'Olier, at the reception last evening?" asked Mrs. Burdell. "He is seldom absent from Mrs. Thornton's receptions."

"He was not there; he is, I believe, on a visit for the holidays."

"Where?" asked Mrs. Burdell. "Do you know, Dottie?"

She turned her eyes timidly to where her father sat; but he seemed deeply buried in the perusal of his papers.

She raised her finger, in caution to Mrs. Burdell, and then said:

"Somewhere along the Hudson; I think his sister Ora is with him."

"He is one of the few sensibly agreeable young men we occasionally meet with," said Mrs. Burdell.

"Yes, very," murmured Dottie.

"And very handsome. It is rare to find so many attractions combined in one individual," added Mrs. Burdell.

Mr. Burdell raised his eyes from the document he seemed to have been abstractedly perusing, and said, sharply:

"Mr. Roderick D'Olier appears to have well established himself in your good opinion, Mrs. Burdell; a great favorite of yours, I presume, madame."

"Mr. Roderick D'Olier appears to create few enemies. He is of good birth, large fortune, highly educated, handsome, gentle and unassuming, though manly in his manner and disposition; I should conceive most amiable."

"I have no doubt he expresses himself highly grati-

fied and duly sensible of the value of the high estimation in which you hold him, Mrs. Burdell."

A gleam shot from her eyes like a flash of lightning, and her throat swelled, but she made no remark.

Dottie, however, who had evidently listened to her father with surprise, exclaimed:

"Indeed, papa, you are in error. Roderick D'Olier has not the least idea that mamma has so good an opinion of him; indeed, he said to me the last time we met him at Mrs. Thornton's, he thought it strange that one so young and beautiful as mamma should treat every one with such disdain."

The eyes of Mr. and Mrs. Burdell met; he removed his quickly, and went on reading his paper.

"Did you observe, mamma, last night, a strange, pale, quiet-looking gentleman who stood for some time near the ballroom door? He was elegantly dressed, but so abstracted in manner."

A faint color spread over the face of Mrs. Burdell, but not a feature moved from their quiet set expression.

"I did," she replied, calmly.

"I don't see how you could have avoided observing him," continued Dottie.

"Why?" asked Mrs. Burdell, quietly.

"Because I do not think that he took his eyes off you during the whole time he remained in the ballroom. Did you see him?"

"I did," said Mrs. Burdell.

"Do you know who he is?" inquired Dottie.

"No, do you?"

"I was told he is of a very aristocratic family, but my informant had forgotten his name."

"It would be of little consequence if it had been remembered," remarked Mrs. Burdell.

At this moment a servant entered the room and handed to Mr. Burdell a letter. He hastily broke open the seal, and read the contents. On concluding it, he said to the servant in a quick tone:

"Where are the gentlemen?"

"In the green reception-room, sir."

"Show them here."

As the liveried servant disappeared, Mr. Burdell said to his wife and daughter:

"I am about to introduce two gentlemen to you, to whom I desire to pay something more than common attention. You will favor me by receiving them with courtesy as they will dine with us to-day."

Immediately the door was flung open and, "Major De Montrose, and Doctor Fulton," were announced.

Mr. Burdell greeted them with marked condescension, and then introduced them to his wife and daughter.

Both Mrs. Burdell and Dottie believed they had been introduced to persons of some note or importance.

No such thing, they had been introduced to Oscar Ross and Hook Flint.

What was their errand here?

CHAPTER V.

THE old year had passed; the new year had been inaugurated by sharp frosts and driving sleet. On the afternoon of the coldest day of the new year, a traveler, upon a sturdy cob, trotted along a lonely road on the outskirts of the deep woods, upon the opposite side of which stood a house; the traveler slackened

his speed as he came in sight of the house, and on reaching it he reined in his horse, and fixed his eyes upon the sign board, whose letters were past being deciphered.

"This must be the house," he muttered; "even though I can't make out the sign. Well, here goes to see."

He knocked on the door but received no answer, so he shouted loudly, "House!" and "Hostler!"

By the time he began to have a suspicion that the house was to let, and there was no one within to mind it, the door opened, and a tall man, with a sharp visage, Roman nose, keen black eyes, and shining black hair, which fell in curly ringlets below his ears, made his appearance.

"Ah!" grunted the horseman, as soon as his eye fell upon him. "I say, my man, can I put up here until to-morrow?"

"You can," replied the man; "for a year if it suits you."

"No, thank you," quickly returned the traveler, with a glance at the bleak landscape, covered for miles on one side with dark woods, while on the other for miles nothing but stunted laurel bushes. "One night in this cheerful neighborhood will last me for a year or more. Here, help me off my horse; I am stiff and numbed with riding, and he is weary of the hard roads."

"All right!" said the man, laying hold of the bridle of the cob. He stood with his back to the neck of the horse, so as to give his rider the benefit of his shoulder to assist him down.

"Are you the hostler?" inquired the traveler as he alighted.

"No, I'm not; my name is Jesse Lings," returned the man; "I am the proprietor."

"Oh, you are Jesse Lings," emphasized the traveler, suddenly fastening his attention upon him, and eyeing him curiously.

"Yes, what of it?" cried the man quickly, eyeing his intended guest, in return, closely and inquisitively.

"Nothing—oh nothing, Mr. Lings," said the traveler, with a slight laugh, "only perhaps you will be good enough to show me into the house, and my horse to the stable."

Mr. Lings turned over the care of the horse to a shock-headed stable boy, and then led the way into the house.

Jesse Lings made rather a show of a spirit of generous hospitality, for which, if the traveler had money, he intended to reimburse himself largely, and he ushered his guest, with a bustling manner, into the apartment, placing a wooden arm-chair near the glowing fire.

A young woman was in the room, and she rose up as the guest entered. She was dark and handsome, with black eyes and black hair, and like her husband, was of the gipsy tribe.

Mr. Lings introduced her as his wife. The traveler bowed to her, and felt that the brilliant jet eyes, turned upon him, were doing the work of divination; that if "the mind could be read on the forehead," the gipsy woman before him was making herself mistress of his, without suffering a letter to escape her.

He returned the compliment by a stare so fixed, that the black eyes gave way, and turned to her husband's with a questioning expression.

He replied to the look with a peculiar glance, and then offered to assist the traveler in divesting himself of his overcoat, an offer which was accepted; and a powerful, well-knit man, was revealed when the rough coat and the woolen muffler were laid aside.

"You are well armed," said Jesse Lings with a grin, which was not mirthful, as he perceived a brace of pistols confined at the waist of his guest by a narrow leather belt.

The traveler drew them out of his belt and examined their polished barrels and the locks, and then consigned them singly to pockets within the breast of his coat, on either side.

"Mr. Lings," he said, with a peculiar decision of tone, "I always go well armed; these pistols are not my only weapons; I am well practised and prompt in their use, I can assure you."

"It would not be at all winning to stop you on the road, I should think," hazarded Mr. Lings, fixing a penetrating glance upon him, and setting his teeth together, so that his cheek bones looked more prominent than ever.

"One man tried it," returned his guest, "and when he recovered he received a lesson on the tight-rope."

"When he recovered?" echoed Mr. Lings.

"Yes," replied the guest coldly; "I thought I had blown his brains out, but it appears that I only shot a part of his cheek, and a bit of his jawbone away; but there—I am sharp, I can tell you. I want something to eat, and I don't want to talk about shooting and hanging, while I smell the cooking."

An evil expression settled on the young woman's nut brown face. She made for the room door, and

as she brushed past her husband, she muttered in an undertone,

"Jed!"

Jesse Lings ground his teeth together, and a very suggestive gulp escaped his throat. He turned his eyes, gleaming like living coals of fire upon the traveler, and said to him:

"You know something of the man you shot, I s'pose?"

His guest fastened upon him a steadfast gaze, and somewhat sternly replied:

"I knew and cared for him as I do of, and for you, Mr. Lings. Understand me, I came here to be accommodated; and if there is any difficulty in the matter, say so, and I am off; it is but about six or seven miles further to ride——"

"Oh," interrupted the landlord with a savage grin, "you shall be accommodated, never fear. Sit down, and I'll have some dinner put before you in quick sticks. Sit down. You shall be accommodated, or my name ain't Jesse Lings."

The glossy-ringleted landlord, with eyes yet glittering like a serpent's, left the room.

No sooner had he departed than the traveler advanced on tip-toe to the door, and for a minute listened with breathless attention to the low murmurings of voices at a short distance in consultation. Presently he returned to the fireplace, and ejaculated:

"Is it so? It is wise to be cautious, and a good thing to provide for contingencies."

He drew out his pistols again, and looked carefully to see that they were ready for use, and then returned them to his pockets; and from the sleeve

of his coat he drew a formidable knife, which, after a slight inspection, he returned to its place.

"I don't mind five if I can get my back against a wall," he said, to himself; "but I had rather get what I want out of Lings without a preliminary struggle, if possible. The rascal is revengeful, but he is infernal mercenary; that, I suspect, will prove my safeguard, else a night here won't be altogether a feast of roses. Jed was the rascal's name sure enough," he muttered, "and if he happened to be a near relative of the amiable looking Mrs. Lings, I must not, in the event of a row, expect any commiserating, tender intervention on her part. Still, she is a woman, and a cat can be coaxed while her kittens are being drowned."

He was interrupted by the appearance of the woman in question to lay the cloth. He glanced at her face —there was nothing at all friendly in the expression of her features. He spoke to her, and she replied with curt brevity. He was too hungry to be very civil, so a silence ensued.

When he had finished his dinner, he invited Jesse Lings to drink with him. Lings acceded, and sat at the opposite side of the fire; Mrs. Lings, sullen and silent, also took a place by the fire, and a conversation between the traveler and Lings commenced upon different topics.

It was interrupted by the entrance of a tall, rough, gipsy-looking fellow, with a villainous sinister visage. Neither in dress nor manner would he be connected with anything but stealing. He nodded to Jesse Lings and his wife, and fixed an insolent stare upon the traveler.

His mission soon developed itself.

He had come to quarrel with the man who had procured Jed a "lesson in dancing on the tight-rope."

He commenced by making a variety of insulting personal remarks on the traveler, with a view to get up a struggle; when it had been ingeniously arranged that Mr. Lings should pinion his arms behind, while his friend throttled the traveler, dividing the plunder and avenging the death of a relative at the same time.

"So soon!" thought the guest. "Well, so much the better."

He glanced at the open door of the bar room, and then at Lings. His glance was so quick as to escape notice. The newcomer, at the same moment, took up the guest's tumbler of brandy and water.

"You a gentleman!" he said, with a coarse laugh. "You're as ugly and mean-looking as one of our scabby calves in the marshes; you are only fit to pay for my drinks."

He raised the glass to his lips, and drained the contents.

He was off his guard.

A jug of boiling water was upon the table. With the quickness of lightning the traveler seized it in his hand, and dashed the scalding liquid into the drinker's face.

"Take the water too! Have it all!" he cried; and then flinging at him the jug, which struck him violently on the head, he leaped upon him, fastened on to his throat, forced him out of the room, through the doorway, along past the bar-room. Opening the door, he hurled the scalded blinded wretch upon the hard earth beneath the elm-tree.

"Lay there," he cried, sternly; "and mark me, if

you attempt to enter the house again, I will pick out your front tooth with a bullet!"

He turned to enter the house. Jesse Lings and his wife were in the entry. He drew his pistols and presented one at the head of each.

"Go in the parlor again," he exclaimed, in a determined voice.

They hesitated; and they heard the sharp click of both hammers drawn back, ready for discharge at the touch of the trigger. They somewhat precipitately made their way to where they were bidden. The traveler followed them, but drew the bolt on the outer door ere he joined them. On entering the parlor he closed the door and placed his back against it.

"Mr. Lings," he said, with a firm calmness of demeanor and voice, "it is time we came to an understanding—we are playing at cross-purposes now. You sent for the blackguard I have just flung into the road to——"

"Oh, no, I did not!" deprecated Lings, raising both hands, and shrinking from the steady point of the muzzle of one of the pistols aimed at him.

"Yes, you did, with a view of wiping off a score you fancy you have chalked up against me," responded the guest. "You were in error in two things: wrong in imagining that I have done anything to excite revenge, and quite wrong in supposing that such a churl, or any three such as he you employed, could get the best of me."

The woman, evidently less alarmed at the firearms than her husband, or more reckless of danger than he, said, with a vicious glare upon him:

"Who shot Jed Lane, and then had him hanged?"

"You had better go to the Tombs and inquire," ex-

claimed the traveler quickly. "The name of the man I spoke of was Zenobia Niri, who stopped me on the Bristol road."

"Zenobia Niri!" said Lings and his wife, in one breath.

"Zenobia Niri," repeated the guest.

"Not Jed Lane!" exclaimed the woman.

"Never heard his name before," said the guest, with emphasis.

Mr. and Mrs. Lings were his humble servants. They begged him to put his pistols away, to sit down and make himself comfortable.

"Wait a moment," said their guest; "this change in your manner is a little too quick to satisfy me."

"Not at all," said Mrs. Lings. "Jed Lane was a relation of mine—Zenobia Niri the bitterest enemy me and my husband ever had. Zenobia took a fancy to me; but when he knew I liked Jesse the best, and married him, he did all he could to injure us. So, you, instead of being an enemy, have proved a good friend by putting Zenobia out of the way."

"Sit down," cried Jesse Lings, again.

"All in good time," responded the guest, with composure. "You must know that my visit here is not an accidental one. I came to this house to see you with an especial purpose. If I succeed, it will be a handsome sum in your pocket; if, however, you cut my throat while I am asleep, you will do yourself no good: because, first, I mentioned that I was coming here to a person, who, if I do not join him in the morning, will visit you with a very strong party, and put some awkward questions to you; and, secondly, you will lose all chance of being well-remunerated for any assistance you may now and hereafter lend to me."

"All right, sir," said Jesse. "You can sit down after the explanation on the square—you needn't be afraid."

"Oh, make no mistake, I am not afraid!" replied the traveler. "I am anxious only that there should be a clear understanding between us. I wish you, also, particularly to know that I attend to my own business and not to other people's. My eyes are for my own matters, my ears for what concerns me alone, and my tongue is better employed than in telling tales. So you see, whoever comes in or goes out of this house, or whatever they do, so that they don't interfere with me, I shall take no notice of whatever."

"Now I does understand you all right!" exclaimed Mr. Lings; promising, with an oath, that his guest might consider himself as safe, so long as he remained at his house, as if he were protected by a troop of soldiers.

"Now to business. I want to find out the abode of a man, who, for many years, has been living in this neighborhood. He is, and has been for a long time, very poorly off; and has supported himself, I believe, by the produce of his own garden, cultivated by his own hands. Do you know such a man?"

Jesse Lings looked at his wife; she was engaged in re-perusing the features of their guest, and in thinking what a very much better looking fellow he was than her Jesse.

"Remember," said the guest, "I shan't be afraid of ten, twenty, or fifty, to obtain all I want to know; and I promise to pay you well if you by your aid, furnish even a clue to the information I seek. Those who know Jack Duke, know full well that he never breaks a promise he makes to man, woman or child."

As he made allusion to the softer sex, he looked very hard into the eyes of Mrs. Lings. He saw that she did not return his gaze with the vindictive glare which she had before darted at him.

There was a pause. Jack Duke, as he named himself, repeated the words,

"Do you know such a man?"

"Let's see," ejaculated Mrs. Lings. "There's the Fodders and Kiefes and Reynolds and Snyders. They all does their own gardens and sells the produce."

"None of them."

"There's the Millers and Loopers and Dutch Joe," continued Jesse Lings, reflectively.

"And Mr. Burdell," exclaimed Mrs. Lings, with emphasis, fixing her bright black eyes on Jack Duke's equally clear hazel orbs.

He smiled and nodded to her.

"He is the man," he said. "Where does he live?"

"That's just what I don't know," replied Jesse Lings.

"Jim Hanks does," observed Mrs. Lings, in a tone which challenged contradiction.

"Well, I s'pose he does," responded Mr. Lings, with a peculiar laugh.

"Where is he to be found?" asked Jack, eagerly.

Jesse Lings laughed again.

"I expect that he lies where you chucked him, jest up against the elum-tree."

"He!" cried Jack Duke; "is he the man of whom you are now speaking?"

"He's no one else," returned Jesse.

"Does he know much about Burdell, do you think?" interrogated Duke.

"There isn't many knows more, I believe," interpolated Mrs. Lings, before her husband could reply.

She seemed now to be as much animated by a desire to serve Jack Duke as she had been previously to see him murdered.

"Awkward—precious awkward!" ejaculated Jack Duke, stroking his pointed beard with a meditative air.

The jet, glittering eyes of Mrs. Lings once more settled with a steadfast expression on those of Jack.

"I think that I can make up the matter between you," she said, quickly, offering at the same time to leave the room, to seek the discomfited Jim Hanks.

"No—no," interposed her husband, hastily; "you remain here. I'll go and hunt him up. If he hasn't gone, he'll be as difficult to handle as a flurried hedgehog. I'd better tackle him."

"So I think," observed Jack; and added: "Don't you think a little golden ointment for his scalded chops will dispose him to listen to reason?"

"There ain't a doubt on it," replied Mr. Lings.

"Well," said Jack, "here's ten dollars for him; but don't let him think that I am sorry for what I have done, and would give him money on that account to keep him quiet. I am the aggrieved party now, you know, though I did teach him how to catch a Tartar."

"I understand all about it," responded Mr. Lings, taking the money. "I'll make it all right with this in no time."

He quitted the room, and Mrs. Lings was all alone with Jack Duke. Their eyes met. Language was given, it is said, to convey thought. Looks were certainly bestowed to convey a language words cannot express; and with a rapidity of utterance, too, which no oral communication could ever achieve. A faint smile curled Jack's lip. He dived his hand into the recesses of a breast-pocket, and brought out a red morocco

case. He opened it, and displayed a large, vulgarly handsome pair of gold pendant earrings. He held them before Mrs. Lings. Her black eyes fastened upon them with greedy admiration.

"Do you like them?" said Jack.

"They are beautiful," she exclaimed.

"You may have them if you like," he said, watching her features with a keen eye.

"You are only joking with me," she said, examining the baubles, with a covetous appreciation.

"I am in earnest; and there are more things of that kind where those came from, waiting to be given to you, if you will do me just a little secret service, and keep faith with me too—for one will be of no use without the other."

"What sort of service?" she asked, still admiring the glittering earrings.

"To watch the actions of an individual; and to let me know, from time to time, what he is doing, and what he is intending to do. Mind, I mean actually, and not what he may seem to be about."

"What do you mean?" she inquired.

Jack repeated his words, and added:

"Will you do it?"

"If I can, certainly."

"You will?"

"There's my hand."

He took it and pressed it tightly.

"And will keep true and strict faith with me, not breathing to mortal what you reveal to me?"

She gazed steadfastly into his eyes, and responded by an undoubtedly strong oath.

"Put the earrings in your pocket. I believe, and have faith in you."

"Who am I to watch?"

"Your husband, Jesse Lings," he answered, in a marked and distinct tone.

She started.

"You said you were going to employ him?"

"So I am, and that is why I want you to watch him. So long as he acts rightly with me, all will go well—but he may not do this; and if he plays me false, it might occasion a rather serious trouble, so I only want to be prepared."

"I understand," she answered. "You may depend upon me. Hush! here he comes."

"Not a word about the earrings.'

"Not a word," she returned, hastily.

"Not a sentence, for your life."

Jesse Lings entered the room, with a smile on his face.

"He's gone," he exclaimed. "The stable boy helped him along a little way. He was burnt about the face, almost blind, and the breath half-shaken out of his body. He swears mortal vengeance, but I'll see him by daylight and put things all right. Now, sir, sit down and enjoy your grog."

Jack did so, and exerted himself to be very agreeable to both. He told strange anecdotes, and sang songs with some taste and execution, and in an excellent tenor voice. He worked Jesse up to a high state of hilarity. He fascinated Mrs. Lings.

As the night wore on he began to have an impression that figures flitted into the bar-room and out again; that there were grim faces and glittering eyes glaring at him occasionally, though only for an instant. Jesse Lings, after a certain hour, was in and out of the room every two minutes.

At length Jack expressed his desire to retire to bed; and Jesse Lings, with an air of alacrity, preceded him to show the way.

He bade Mrs. Lings good-night, and as their eyes met, she gave him a peculiar look, as though to put him on his guard—at least, so he interpreted it.

After he bade good-night to Jesse Lings, he barred the door and examined the room. Everything appeared to be clean, and there seemed nothing to create suspicion. Yet he did not undress himself; but, after examining his pistols to see if they were ready for use, he moved about his room some time, and then extinguished his light, sitting up dressed as he was to watch.

He heard beneath the tramp of heavy feet, and had no difficulty in surmising that a body of men was engaged in some transaction, which they were too cautious to let in the light of day upon.

While he was wondering what it could be, and speculating upon the prudence of endeavoring to find out, he fancied that there was a faint glimmer of light flickering in his room.

He turned his eyes instantly to the spot from whence he thought it proceeded, and with astonishment, accompanied by a rapid action of his heart, he saw a small door, ingeniously contrived in the oaken paneling of the room, open, and the face of Nan Lings illuminated by the rays of a lamp, peering into the dark room.

A moment, and he was before her.

"What is the matter?" asked Jack.

"Dressed!" she uttered in a low tone. "I thought you would have the sense to comprehend a look. Enter this passage quickly—you have no time to lose—and follow me. Quick—be as silent as the grave."

He stepped into the narrow space at her side, and

she drew the door to, and fastened it with a broad flat iron bolt. As she did so, with a hurried exclamation she extinguished the light. The next instant he heard the door of his bedroom burst in with a violent crash.

"We are not safe, even here," she suddenly whispered; and seizing his hand, said to him: "Follow me—fear not—don't stumble—I will tell you when to stop. Hush! not a sound."

He followed, not quite sure that he was not, even by her, being conducted into some fatal trap.

CHAPTER VI.

GRACE had no want of courage, or firmness of character; she did not lack self-possession, nor did she want those sustaining powers which enable some to face, encounter, and surmount emergencies of an essentially trying nature; yet she gave way under the pressure of the strange circumstances by which she had been so suddenly and unexpectedly surrounded by her self-nominated cousin, Mildred Dupont, at the moment of the departure of the old year, and the birth of the new.

It was not simply that she felt an involuntary tremor at finding herself alone with the singular woman who had taken her under her protection, at the hour of midnight, at the top of the tower; or that a strange dread crossed her when she saw a dark figure, flit like a guilty object across the park, and disappear in that sombre plantation which she had noted with an instinctive shudder on her arrival; or that she felt a shuddering awe steal through her frame when that gasping, moaning gust of wind, swept whirling past

the open window in the tower, at the very instant the clock commenced sounding the hour of midnight, as though it was the last expiring breath of the dying year.

It was that wild, unearthly cry, which rose up from the plantation of the black pines, which curdled her blood, and thrilled the very marrow of her bones.

It was the unearthly expression which the face of her companion assumed, the strange gleam of fiendish exultation which shot from her eyes, that made the heart of Grace suspend its beating, and caused her to remember no more until she found herself alone, in a darkness most intense.

She placed her hands to her burning temples, and pressed them that she might collect her thoughts. She remembered vaguely what had taken place, and she then, in alarm, felt about her. She was in bed, and in her night-robe.

She sat up—it was so utterly dark that she could distinguish nothing. She stretched her hands about and round her. She grasped the bed-clothes. She had an intuitive horror that she should place her heated hand upon a human face, icy cold.

No. She was alone!

But how long had she been so?—how had she recovered from her faint?—how, and by whom had she been disrobed?

One question was answered for her. The tower clock tolled the hour of three.

It would be three hours to daylight. She was gradually verging into a frantic terror, when her native strength of mind stepped in to her aid. She began to take herself to task for giving way to fear; and, after an effort to control her weakened nerves,

she succeeded, in some degree, in calming her perturbation.

Still, that horrifying cry rang in her ears, and that fearful expression on the face of Mildred Dupot yet glared upon her, and interfered with her efforts to sink into a deep sleep.

She now felt convinced that she was safely in bed, in the rooms that were to be hers while in Falcon Manor, and that if she could woo slumber, she could repose without fear of interruption.

A superstitious tinge in the composition of her mind was simply natural, brought up as she had been, in a large, old-fashioned dreary house in a lonely place, filled by the changes of the wind, or by the varying of its force, with strange sounds: companioned, too, by girls who, like herself, had no other home, and who, like herself, raised up idealities out of yearning hopefulness; who filled their dreary void with figures bright, and kind, and fair, because an actual life they knew not; who fashioned faces to be seen in their dreams, and fancied voices in the air—the opposite of the woman who presided over the house, and therefore angelic. The more highly sensitive would aver that they had actually had visions, and held communion with spirits, making the flesh of their companions crawl and vibrate as, huddled together, they sat and whispered the falsities created by overwraught imaginations. It is not surprising, therefore, that she was a little too ready to lean to the marvelous, nor should it be considered a proof of a deficiency of force of character; it, in truth, formed a portion of her education apart from her school life.

She tried to find some clue to the conduct of Mildred Dupont; some cause for the control she had as-

sumed over her; why she should initiate her into the secrets of the house; and however she could be Mildred's secret.

She fell into a state of dreamy reasoning.

She opened her eyes, and they rested upon the calm pale features of Mildred Dupont; yet with an expression of commiseration or sorrowing pity in them.

She sprang up in the bed. A moment since it had been blank blackness. Now the sunlight was streaming in at the window, playing upon the gilded furniture, and glittering on the many cut-glass ornaments. She stared at Mildred's face.

"What does it all mean?" she said, excitedly.

"That you are lying late, and have been dreaming," replied Mildred.

Grace placed her hands over her eyes.

"Last night——" she commenced.

"We retired early," interposed Mildred. "The change from your recent abode, strange faces, people, circumstances, have a little deranged you."

"Strange circumstances, indeed!" muttered Grace.

"You are feverish—your system is out of order; I foresaw that such would be the case, and I have provided you a little quieting drink. Here it is—drink it. I have excused your absence from breakfast, and have promised Milroy and our guests that you will meet them at luncheon."

"Milroy Falcon?" said Grace, in a tone of surprise.

"Why not?" asked Mildred, elevating her eyebrows.

"But last night——"

"You have not yet recovered from your dreams," once more interrupted Mildred; and handing to her a

wineglass with some crimson colored liquid in it, she pressed it on her, and prevailed upon her to take it.

In less than a minute Grace was asleep once more; and when she again awoke, a maid, appointed to attend upon her, was ready to dress her.

"What hour is that?" she asked.

"Twelve, miss," replied the girl.

A cold thrill ran through Grace's frame as she laid her head back on the pillow.

"Will you please rise now?" inquired the girl, respectfully.

Grace rose up quietly, and suffered herself to be dressed without speaking a word. The potion administered to her by Mildred had stilled her nerves; but it seemed to have rendered her not only powerless physically, but mentally. It was an effort to walk, to think. It seemed to her as if she could only breathe by gasping.

"You seem faint, miss. Shall I open the window?" exclaimed the girl, suiting the action to the word.

Grace tottered toward it and leaned out; the cold air played gratefully upon her hot face, and she felt greatly revived by its freshness. Her eyes, wandering with unsettled gaze over the lovely prospect before her, fell suddenly upon two figures walking in the park beneath the window.

It was Milroy Falcon, and Ora D'Olier leaning upon his arm.

He turned his eyes upward, and they fell upon the face of Grace. He started back, recoiled several paces, and made some exclamation, which appeared to alarm Ora, for she looked hastily around her with a frightened look.

Grace felt, she knew not why, compelled to retire

from the window. Yet she wished that she might meet Milroy Falcon—might look in his face and read, if possible, the tale she thought it must needs tell.

Her strength seemed suddenly to come back to her. She, however, accepted the guidance of the maid to the room in which the luncheon was to be served, and entered in the full expectation of meeting Milroy there.

But he was not there. Mildred Dupont sat alone, seemingly lost in contemplation. She roused up, on the entrance of Grace, and quitting her seat, advanced to meet her. There was kindness in her tone and manner, which was very acceptable to Grace, when she said:

"I am glad to see you better."

"The events of last night came upon me so suddenly, they were so strange and mysterious, that for the time I was overcome by them," Grace replied.

"Dreams!" ejaculated Mildred, with a slight curl of her lip.

"No," retorted Grace, casting a hurried glance around her; "unless it is a dream for me to be here—a dream that I quitted, under your guidance, the hated custody of Ross—a dream that you have declared to me that great families have great secrets and that I am one!"

"Hush!" exclaimed Mildred, hurriedly.

"Do not form an erroneous opinion of my firmness of character, or my strength of purpose," observed Grace, "by last night's weakness. I confess I was startled out of consciousness, but not out of memory; nor shall I waver in the endeavor I shall make to unravel the strange mystery."

"It would be dangerous, Grace, to make any such attempt."

"Danger would not deter me, Mildred; I have been schooled into self-reliance, and feel both armed and prepared to encounter all or any of the common trials or dangers to which in life, under ordinary or extraordinary circumstances, I may be subjected. I have fortified myself also to take up an aim, under all difficulties to carry it on, and never to yield it up to any opposition, however overpowering."

"You talk well, Grace," said Mildred, with a smile, which might have been taken for a snear.

"And shall act! I have wrongs to avenge! The hope of accomplishing that object has for years held me back from suicide," cried Grace, with very deliberate and marked enunciation.

"Your wrongs to avenge!" echoed Mildred, slightly elevating her eyebrows. "What wrongs?"

"What wrongs! wrongs that I have brooded over from childhood; the wrong of being a deserted, homeless, nameless thing; discarded by those who should have cared and treated me as human; gifted with a keen sense of position——"

"Proud, too?" said Mildred, in the same questioning tone.

"Proud in rebelling at my position, as a degraded outcast; proud in scorning to be considered a thing of shame, who could not enter the circle of society of those to whom I am by nature most closely tied, without calling up a hot blush of shame into their cheeks; proud in my intense abhorrence to be outraged by the claim of the man Ross to be my father——"

"Beware!" cried Mildred, with sudden and startling emphasis.

"Of what?" asked Grace, haughtily. "Of whom —of Ross? I hold him in unmeasurable scorn."

"How know you," responded Mildred, "but that you are a child rescued from rags and wretchedness, and placed from motives of charity in the very school you so bitterly condemn?"

"Why not ask me how I know that the man, Oscar Ross, is not my father?" she responded. "It is because I feel it in my heart—my soul. You have said that I am what you say I am—who am I? tell me that! I am content to learn the worst; content to walk to the proud owner of this grand old mansion and these vast domains, and say to him, 'I am not your cousin —I am——'"

"Peace!" interrupted Mildred. "I see you have a notion of self-will, and you wish it to be humored."

"I have at least the will not to suffer indignity. For your kindness I could worship you; for your taunts of dependence, my answer is to absolve myself from the condition, and to leave this roof and you at once—and forever."

"No, Grace, not at least with that impression. You are free to go if you will, but not under the delusion that I have stooped to taunt you with dependence. You wrong me—I could not so shame my true sense of dignity and honor. I will confess to you that I do know who you are. I will tell you that you are not justified in speaking of vengeance. I will also promise you one day to reveal all. The truth you can only know through me. My desire is to elevate, not to humble you. Stay with me, and I will be your friend; leave me, and I cannot attempt to predict your fate. For the present, at least, be silent;—hush! compose yourself! I hear Milroy, your cousin—remember—

coming. Ora and her brother Roderick are with him. Forget last night, and beware how you drop a word having allusion to its events."

Grace, in the succeeding week, found that she had become the object of Milroy Falcon's eager notice, when she believed herself to be unobserved; and the discovery occasioned her some uneasiness, especially as Mildred made her occupy a certain position in the eyes of Milroy Falcon. She felt that, if closely questioned by Milroy as to her early life, she could not sacrifice her truth to countenance whatever tale Mildred might have told respecting her.

She was glad, occasionally, to stroll by herself over some portions of the wild domains, if only to be alone —with her own thoughts.

One morning, while alone, and deeply engaged in endeavoring to make clear some of the strange mysteries by which she was surrounded, she was startled by the slight pressure of a hand upon her shoulder. She turned to find herself confronted by Milroy Falcon. His face was pale, and a sad gloom rested on his brow; yet he smiled, but the smile was painful to Grace.

"Cousin Grace," he said, in a gentle voice, "I have had no opportunity of speaking a few words to you unheard by others for whose ears they are not intended. We are alone now, and the opportunity is one, I think, which ought not to be missed. Will you accompany me where we shall not meet the gaze of inquisitive eyes or be listened to by curious ears?"

"I will attend you with pleasure, Mr. Falcon."

It was with emotions of bewildered astonishment that she found herself conducted by him into the plantation of the black pines.

CHAPTER VII.

MAJOR DE MONTROSE had not been three minutes in the presence of Mrs. Burdell, before she detected the quality of his character; and she saw that his eyes settled upon hers with an expression of admiration in them, and he saw that she returned his look, as if he was a stone statue. He had the tact to keep his eyes under control for the time being, and not to suffer them to wander in her direction—for a short time at least. Whatever might be his purpose, to make an enemy of her, or to create any disgust for him in her mind, formed no part of it.

He simply glanced at Dottie Burdell, and saw that she was eyeing him and hardly with the interest or the favorable impression he had desired to create. During the time Major De Montrose was conversing upon various subjects, Doctor Fulton watched her closely, and with misgivings.

"The shorter our stay here to-day the better," he thought. "If she can't trace a man's position by his features, and confirm her convictions out of his mouth, I am the president of the United States. How she looks under her eyelashes at the major! While he is vaporing to Mr. Burdell, she says, 'That man is not what he pretends to be,' as clearly as if she shouted it with a speaking-trumpet."

While these thoughts were crossing his mind, Mrs. Burdell rose, and Dottie, following her, left the room.

As soon as the door had closed, Mr. Burdell followed on tiptoe in the direction they had taken, opened the

door with a stealthy hand, gazed out into the corridor, and listened to their retreating footsteps as they ascended the stairs. Then closing the door once more, he returned to his guests.

"We may speak freely now," he said. "First, let me thank you, Major De Montrose, for the friendly communications I have received from you, and to assure you of the strong impression I entertain of their importance."

"If you take any interest, Mr. Burdell, in the subject at all, they are of importance," replied Major De Montrose.

"Clearly; they come, too, from a source as unlooked-for as reliable," continued Mr. Burdell.

The major bowed.

"I assure you, Major, ever since I have known how wrongly and unjustly my family have been dispossessed of their rights, their restoration to their proper place has been a cherished wish the very nearest to my heart. You spoke of some documents in your possession, which very seriously affect the whole question; indeed, without which the thing cannot be brought to a satisfactory conclusion." The nostrils of Doctor Fulton contracted and expanded.

"I have those documents," returned the major.

The doctor passed his thumb and fingers from either side of his jaw-bones to his chin.

"Yes," continued the major, "I have those documents in my keeping, though not here."

"Though not here," muttered Doctor Fulton.

"They are extremely valuable," pursued the major, "and I therefore take very great care of them."

"The very greatest possible care," thought Doctor Fulton.

"I keep them safely, only too safely," added the major.

"Only too safely," repeated the doctor to himself.

"Quite proper—very proper, indeed," exclaimed Mr. Burdell. "You have them at your banker's no doubt?"

"Well no," reflected the disguised doctor, "not at his banker's—certainly not at his banker's."

"To be candid with you, Mr. Burdell, I have no faith in the privacy of a compartment at one's banker's," observed the major.

"No?" ejaculated Mr. Burdell, in an inquiring tone.

"It is all very well to keep plate there, and such things; but documents—no. They go to one's case for coupons, or they entrust clerks to visit them with the same object, and one is never safe," remarked the major.

"Possibly," returned Mr. Burdell. "There is some force in that suggestion—of course. They are deposited with you solicitor, to be sure. How absurd I should not have remembered that your solicitor would be the man in whose safe custody they must necessarily be placed!"

"Not necessarily," thought Hook Flint, his twinkling eyes flashing through his colored spectacles.

The major smiled, though the very name of lawyer made him feel faint.

"With such very important papers, Mr. Burdell," he said, "I trust nobody but myself."

"He trusts nobody but himself," gulped his companion in disguise.

"I have them in a very exceedingly snug place," cried the major, rubbing his hands.

"Very snug," muttered the doctor, with a grin.

"And can place my hand on them in one moment if I wish," the major concluded.

"With my permission," thought Hook, "always with my permission."

However, one important point was determined. It was, that all claim to Falcon Manor and its vast domains should, for the present, be abandoned, and an entirely distinct course of action should be adopted.

As they parted, Ross said, with earnestness:

"You are quite sure, Mr. Burdell, you are correct as to the name?"

"Oh, beyond a doubt!" he replied. "Is it not one of my own?"

"And the locality?"

"Well, yes. But that remains to be proved. You will ascertain that, Major?"

"Exactly. Good-bye, Mr. Burdell."

"Good-night, my very good friends. You will not forget the appointment?"

"We will be there," ejaculated Doctor Fulton.

"And I, if I live!" exclaimed Mr. Burdell.

"Farewell!"

So they parted.

* * * * * *

"We got on well to-day, Ross, my boy!" said Hook Flint, when they were in the cab again.

"Rather surprisingly well," answered Ross.

"I fancy you ought to congratulate me upon my performance," continued Hook.

"I do congratulate you!" exclaimed Ross. "You surprised me."

"Aha! you'll know my value better hereafter," observed Hook, significantly. "That was a fine guess of mine about—" here he whispered in Ross's ear.

"A guess?" echoed Ross.

"To be sure," responded Hook. "A mere guess, founded on the similarity of circumstances which surround these old families."

The conversation now turned on other points of their scheme, until they arrived at the dwelling of Hook Flint.

As Ross inhaled the air of his apartment, he gave vent to an expletive. He was not charmed with its purity or order.

"To-morrow, thank my stars! I part from this extract of a million old rags," he muttered. "I shall, at least, pitch my tent in sweeter quarters. But after that—ah! after that!"

He leaned his head upon his hand, and his elbow on the table, and was soon plunged in deep thought. A soft hand upon his shoulder roused him. He looked up, and smiling, said, in a whisper:

"Ah, Fan!—my dear, dear little Fan!"

She placed her finger on her lips. Then bending over him, she placed her mouth near his ear, her warm breath trembling on his cheek.

"Sleep not to-night!" she whispered.

Another minute and she was gone. She glided behind him, and he could not tell how she disappeared, for his room door was still closed.

CHAPTER VIII.

JACK DUKE viewed the position in which he was placed by Mrs. Lings with a degree of nervous apprehension perfectly excusable. The bravest man will always experience a quickening of the pulses of his

heart when dangers are at hand, the proximity or the extent of which he is unable to measure.

In one sense, therefore, he congratulated himself upon his present escape. But how long was he to continue safe? What if she were leading him where he could be murdered without a chance of resistance? He did not relish the reflection; and it rendered the propriety of his proceeding doubtful, though certainly, in the confined space he was in, he could do little if attacked.

Suddenly Mrs. Lings stopped.

"I know what is passing in your mind," she whispered. "You doubt my truth to you. You think that because Jesse is my husband, I should willingly lure you to any spot, where you might perish by his or any other hand without resistance. You believe me to be treacherous. You are wrong! If I did not intend to save you, why not let you be killed in your own room? There was enough went into that room to have made all your attempts to save yourself useless."

"Was Jesse among them?" whispered Jack.

"No," she returned; "he happened to be out, seeing to the depositing of some goods which have just reached here from the coast, or it might not have happened. Jim Hanks put them up to it. He told 'em you shot Jed, and they have gone into your room to seize and hang you. I got round this way just in time to get you out of your cage. I will save you, you shall see, though you doubt me."

"Why do you take this interest in me?" he asked, hesitatingly.

"Still suspicious!" she responded, as if vexed by the question. She shifted her soft hand from his wrist to his palm, and pressed his fingers. "Do not ask me

now," she answered; "some other time. Believe only that I will serve and save you. Say no more—the sound of a voice might put all the hounds on the scent."

She released his hand, went on, then paused and whispered: "Here is a ladder to descend—follow me." She went quickly down, and he followed carefully. Again a long dark passage, another descent, and then she caught hold of his hand. "Remain here; you are safe. Jesse will release you when he comes," she whispered in his ear. She wrung his hand, then flung it from her.

He listened for retreating footsteps, but could not catch them; he called her name, as though he wished to say something to her—she answered not. He groped about the place. There were large casks filled with liquid piled on one another, with not much space left, and he felt quite certain now that he was alone again. Loose sawdust was plentiful beneath his feet, and the air was impregnated with a strong odor of brandy.

"How long, I wonder, am I to kick my heels in this contraband cave?" he muttered. "If Jesse Lings does not look sharp, I shall try to find a spile in one of these brandy casks, and pass my opinion upon the genuine cognac, which a well-cultivated sense of smell assures me every drop of it is. A very remarkable young woman Mrs. Nan Lings—deuced handsome. A skin as clear and shining as satin-wood, and just about the color; eyes as black as coals, bright as lightning, and flash much the same way. What a Tartar she must be when provoked! I fancy she is rather disposed to this graceless scamp; if so, I shall be well off and ill off. No matter, I have got out of worse scrapes than ever she can draw me into. If I could but transport myself into the land of dreams—it would look

well. There would be no white feather displayed in slumbering in this hole."

He stretched his arms out, and after one or two mishaps, in which head and shins suffered, he discovered the desired haven and laid himself quietly and carefully down. The fumes of the liquor soon threw him into a state of stupor, and he became, in a very brief space, comparatively senseless.

He was aroused from his somnolent condition by the voice of Jesse Lings bawling in his ear. He opened his eyes and started up. He was in a small neatly-furnished bedroom. The sun was shining brightly through the latticed panes of the window.

"How did I come here?" he asked, gazing wildly round him.

"Well, you had to be carried here—that's all," answered Jesse, laughing. "I found you in the cellar, as sound as a log, and carried you here. You have plenty of pluck to go to sleep there."

Jack began to collect his thoughts.

"Aye," he said, "this is a precious establishment of yours, Mr. Lings, from which a man——"

"Say no more about it, sir," interposed Jesse. "My wife, Nan, has told me all. It wouldn't have happened if I had been home. Let it go for what it is worth. You are all right, only a little frightened."

"Frightened, Mr. Lings! Reconsider that word, if you please," interrupted Jack, sharply.

"Well, sir, startled—put out like."

"Certainly, put out," responded Jack.

"And you are none the worse. I have seen Jim Hanks, and had a talk with him. He's very sorry, sir, for what has happened. He begs your pardon, and

he'll tell you as much as he knows about Burdell, and take you over to where he lives."

"Ah! that is news, indeed, Mr. Lings," cried Jack, leaping to his feet. "I will just give myself a wash, and be down-stairs with you in a few minutes."

"All good again, Mr. Duke?"

"Oh, the best of friends, Mr. Lings!" answered Jack, with a peculiar laugh.

Jesse Lings snapped his fingers, and laughed too, boisterously. He descended the stairs, with a hop, skip and jump, to report progress to Jim Hanks, who was waiting him below.

Jack Duke soon followed. He was greeted by the tall, strongly-knitted ruffian, who had insulted him, who begged pardon for his rudeness, and hoped it would be forgotten.

"Oh," responded Jack, quickly, "I am quite satisfied, if you are."

"A little more than satisfied," returned Hanks. "Next time such a thing comes off, I hope you'll drink your liquor neat; I had too much of your hot water."

"It was hot," observed Jack, with a chuckle.

"Hot?" echoed Hank. "My cheek is blistered like the cracklin' o' roast pork, and smarts as if the brine had been rubbed in."

Jack tossed him a half-dollar.

"You can bathe your cheeks in brandy if you like, while I eat my breakfast," he said, as he caught sight of Nan Lings entering with a well-filled tray in her hands, the ham having an overpowering fragrance in his nostrils.

Jim Hanks instantly availed himself of the funds thus placed in his possession, and called upon Mr. Lings to serve him with some brandy.

Jack Duke expected that Nan Lings would be struck with his well-brushed hair and whiskers, now presented to her notice; but she did not, to his surprise, look in his face. And when she had finished arraying the table, she left the room without a look or a word, beyond the cold "good-morning" with which she responded to the very friendly greeting which he had saluted her with.

This was strange and vexing. Her face—calm, almost sad—divested of the fierce evil expression of the night before, was yet handsomer in his eyes than ever. Strange that she should treat him thus! for on his arrival at the house, he was what may be termed weather-warm; his face red, his hair disordered, and he careless whether or not he gained a place in her good opinion; yet she had been gracious of the first escapade, and even tender. Now that he was gracious and wanted to be tender, she was cold and reserved.

"Woman—woman," he muttered, "there is no understanding your natures! you retire when we advance, and advance when we retire. Very good, my Nan, I shall retire again—when it suits me that you should advance."

After his breakfast he devoted himself to Jim Hanks, to get all particulars which he considered of the very greatest importance.

"How far is it to Fox Hollow," he inquired.

"About four miles and a half," replied Hanks.

"I had better take my horse, if that is the case."

"You can if you like," responded Hanks; "but the way we goes ain't a very good road for a horse, unless he can take a stiff fence and a wide brook in good style."

"If he can, he won't attempt either with Jack Duke

on his back. I'll just slip on my coat and get my hat, and I'll be with you."

And these garments were in the room above, and he remembered that he had left his gripsack unlocked. He ran up the stairs to secure the one and obtain the others. As he shot up the stairs he encountered Nan, who whispered, with startling rapidity:

"Take your pistols with you!"

Before he could reply or stay her, she was gone.

"These vagabonds are playing the double game still!" he muttered. "Never mind, I am a match for them. Bah! I've forgotten more than they will ever know."

With that self-commendation, Mr. Duke turned into his room, locked and put away his valise, placed his pistols ready for instant use, drew on his coat, descended the stairs, and gave directions to Mr. Lings to prepare for his dinner, the bill of fare for which he provided himself with.

"You will be sure to come back?" exclaimed Lings, with an equivocal expression on his face, and a furtive glance at Hanks.

"Sure to come back, Mr. Lings!" returned Jack, with emphasis. "Do not fall into a mistake concerning me," he added. "It takes a great deal to put me in trouble, and not much to get me out of it! Good-bye, Lings. Lead on, Hanks. You are the guide, and you go first."

Off they went, Jesse Lings standing at the door to watch them cross the fields. Jack turned round, and at an upper window saw Nan Lings, who made a hurried sign to him which he did not comprehend. Now, to such a man as Jack Duke, it scarcely mattered what the sign was, or that he did not comprehend its abso-

lute meaning, It sufficed for him that she had made a sign, and, coupled with her brief exhortation respecting his weapons, it assured him that it was a warning sign, and that it bore reference to his companion.

"Her coldness and indifference this morning were assumed," he muttered, to himself. "There is something at the back of that, and I must and I will find it out. As for this long-backed, raw-boned, knock-kneed moon-calf, I'll be very summary in my dealings with him if he attempts any tricks with me!"

They went on steadily, Hanks keeping well on in advance; looking back, now and then, to urge Jack to keep up with him, which he did as it suited him; for he kept his eyes well open, and it appeared to him that the way grew wild, desolate and lonely, now descending into hollows where pools of stagnant frozen water occupied a portion of the pathway—if such it could be called, where no beaten track existed—and now passing over hills rugged and crested with tangled brush and stubble, through which they had to tear their way slowly.

Jim Hanks hurried down into a deep dell, which contained deep woods of tall oaks and stunted struggling elms, self-sown in ages past, and now clustered in dreary-looking entanglement. Toward these woods Hanks made his way.

Jack glanced right and left and before him. He felt for his pistol, and called on his guide to return. The man stopped. There was an expression on his face which so subtle a reader of human physiognomy as Jack quickly interpreted. He slid his hand into the half-opened breast of his coat, and in a tone of voice not be mistaken told Hanks to come back with him.

With a rough growl, the man obeyed.

"What now?" he said, with a gloomy knit of his shaggy brow.

"Just this, I see a gipsy encampment yonder, and I do not choose to pass through it."

"You ain't afraid of a few harmless gipsies, be you?"

"Not a hundred of them if they were all like you," returned Jack; "but I have my reasons for not passing through their encampment—at least not now; I may want to do so by-and-bye."

"To fit them with bracelets for finding fowls in hen-roosts, pigs in strawyards, and ponies in pasture fields," cried Hanks, insolently.

Jack laughed grimly.

"You ought to be honest," he said, "to take me for a thief-taker. Bah!" he cried, grating his teeth, and speaking with intense vindictiveness. "I hate them, hate them every man! I would no more mind shooting him, if one was here now, than I will you, if you do not choose, instantly, some other path to the man Burdell's cottage!"

Jack produced a pistol, and pointed it direct at Hanks' head.

"Put that back!" he roared. "Put that back! I'll take you all right."

"Strike into another path at once, then; and remember, the slightest attempt to play me a trick, and I'll drop you as surely as I would a rat."

Jim Hanks at once, with nimble steps, pursued a course widely to the right of the one he was taking, and every now and then looked over his shoulder to find the pistol yet in Jack's hand, and pointed in his direction. When the camp was out of sight, Jack drew up to him.

"What gipsies were those? what name?"

"The Lanes," responded Jim.

"Is Swift Lane with them?" inquired Jack.

"Do you know him?" asked Jack, in surprise.

"I am asking you a question," exclaimed Jack. "I don't want you to put questions."

"He is," replied Jim.

"Enough," ejaculated Jack.

"Let me ask you a question, though," said Jim. "You ain't a police officer, are you?"

"I am not. I tell you, I am their mortal foe, and they mine."

"Then give us your hand," cried Jim, with a cry of exultation.

"No," said Jack, "I don't shake hands with every——" "vagabond" he was about to say; he changed it for, "man I meet."

"Oh, well, so as you don't mean trap, I'm your friend. We'll soon be with old Burdell now. But you must be keerful, mind you, or he'll up with a blunderbuss at you in half a second," returned Jim.

"Leave me to manage him;—and mark me, if events turn out as I imagine, I will want your help—not to-day, but at another time. If you do the work I shall pay you well, you'll be a man for life. Those who employ me will pay like the treasury."

"It ain't a hanging matter, is it?"

"Do I look such a fool to play at such a game?" inquired Jack.

Hanks grinned.

"You look like an early bird, you do!" he responded, with a chuckling laugh. Then he, pointing into a small valley, where stood a lone cottage, said:

"This is Fox Hollow, and there's old Burdell's cottage."

Jack paused to gaze at it for a minute, and then took out of his pocket a small packet, and opening it, glanced over its contents. When he had finished he said abruptly:

"Lead on!"

Jim Hanks struck down into the hollow, Jack keeping up with him as the cottage was reached, and opening the door entered abruptly, alone.

By the fire was seated, as if in deep thought, a tall, gaunt, hard-featured man with grey hair. Near to him was a young girl with her arms caressingly twined around a pale delicate boy. His eyes and hair were dark, and the eyes seemed unnaturally large for his face, yet of lustrous brilliancy.

As Jack's eyes fell on the girl's face, he started and muttered:

"Younger, but as like her as two peas."

The picture was for a moment preserved. His entrance startled them and their positions were changed. They all rose up to greet the stranger, especially the elderly, grey-haired man. He advanced toward Jack Duke with the aspect of one who considered his presence an intrusion.

"What do you want?" he asked, abruptly.

"Your name is Burdell?"

"It is. What then?"

"A descendant of the Falcons?" continued Jack.

"There are some interrogatories which are impertinences, unless they are supported by sound reasons," returned the old man. "Have you such reasons?" he demanded.

"If you are not a descendant of the Falcons, my errand is not to you," returned Jack, laconically.

"But if I acknowledge so much?" observed the old man.

"Then I desire a few words with you."

"Say on," exclaimed the old man, drawing himself up with a proud air, "I will listen."

"I would like to speak in private with you," said Jack.

"What can you have to say to me?" he asked, looking at him with a searching gaze.

"I am as anxious to reveal it, as you may be to hear it," answered Jack; "but it must be said in your ear alone."

The old man gave an impatient laugh—there was no mirth in it.

'Follow me," he said. "It is little you can have to say to me that I shall care to hear; still I will extend to you the courtesy you ask."

The old man led the way by a winding wooden staircase to the room above. Jack followed him, and as he entered, he closed the door behind him.

"Speak," said the old man, "we are alone."

He seated himself, and motioned to Jack to do the same.

"I am quite aware that I shall have to combat with prejudices long firmly persevered in," continued Jack; "but the man who is just and sincere——"

"Come to your business at once without preface. My prejudices are nothing to you," interrupted Burdell. "Who has employed you, and why are you here?"

Jack cleared his throat.

"Mr. Whitney Falcon Burdell——"

Old Mr. Burdell rose up.

"I suspected as much," he exclaimed, in a firm clear voice. "I do not want to be unnecessarily rude to you, but I must insist on your promptly obeying my orders. You are an agent employed in the affair, and therefore not to blame. For years I have held myself aloof from the advances, the importunities, and the iniquitous suggestions of that man; I have submitted to sacrifices of no mean kind, to escape from his arts and sinister designs. Go back to him, tell him I despise him, and will hold no intercourse of any kind with him or with any one from him, until the day shall come when the voice of justice and right shall ring in his ears a knell of death. Then I will meet him. Go, depart!—not a word. You attempt to delay your stay one second and it will result only in an expulsion as offensive to you, as it will be painful but imperious to me. Go!"

"One word," said Jack, "before I quit you finally. It is essential that you consider well before you dismiss me. My instructions are to impress upon you, that Whitney Burdell will not, in the event of your obstinately declining to entertain the proposition I am empowered to make, have aught whatever to do with you more. You may live where you please, certain that he will not endeavor to discover your abode, but you may be sure that he will sternly decline to see you, should you attempt to have an interview with him, and that he will return unopened whatever communication you at some future time may be compelled to forward to him. Briefly, refuse his present and last offer, and he will forget that you ever existed."

"My only answer, is my unspeakable contempt for him, and whatever is connected with him. Our conference is ended."

He motioned to the door. Jack took up his hat, with an air of mortification. He opened the door and descended the stairs.

As he entered the apartment beneath, the face of the young girl, who was yet tenderly caressing the pale boy, again caught his eye, and he muttered some words to himself rapidly. Then he advanced to her, and said:

"Pardon what may appear an impertinent question, but is not intended as such—have you a sister?"

Before the girl could answer, the old man seized him roughly by the shoulder, and thrust him toward the door.

"How dare you ask that question?" he cried, passionately. "Leave this house, or I will fling you out of the door!"

Jack turned fiercely to him.

"You are an old man, and beneath your own roof," he growled, "else I would avenge the insult you have forced upon me, in a manner which you should have borne tokens of to your grave."

"Begone!" almost howled old Burdell. "Provoke me no further, or on your own head be the consequences!"

Jack saw that the young girl bent upon him an appealing look as though asking him to leave without further altercation. He smiled at her, raised his hat to her and the boy, and then, with as much calmness as he could assume, slowly sauntered out of the house.

Rejoining Jim Hanks, who was at the gate, he directed him to conduct him back to Jesse Lings. On his way he marked silently, and with careful attention, prominent objects, that he might know the route again to traverse alone.

"You seem to know the affairs of old Burdell pretty well," he said to his companion, suddenly. "You can tell if the girl I saw there is his daughter?"

"No, I can't," said Jim. "Nobody knows anything about Burdell's private affairs, unless he chooses to tell them—and he don't choose."

"Then you don't know."

"I don't. I suppose that——"

"Ah, never mind—I can guess as well as you; but I don't want guesses, I require certainties. She has lived with him, as far as you know, some years."

"Yes; he brought her up, I believe, from a baby."

"Speak of what you know."

"Well, she's been with him as long as I have known him, now some ten years."

"Here?"

"Here, sir."

"What is her name?"

"Flora."

"And the boy?"

"Don't know much about him. Both the gal and the old man are very fond of him, and very keerful about him."

"What name do they give him?"

"Harold."

"Jim Hanks, I must have that boy."

"You?"

"Yes. We must get him away from the old man, and not let the grass grow under our feet before we do it."

"Don't have nothing to do with that—I don't."

"Look you here, Jim; I don't take you for a fool."

"Very good."

"Now, you know—or if you don't know I'll tell you—one Doctor Franklin said, 'Get money; honestly if you can, but get money!' I don't think that you are the man to close your hand when you see a heap of gold dollars mad to leap into it."

"Well, no; not altogether."

"So you are the man to get money, and I to give it—do you agree?"

"Well, yes, but what do you want to do with the boy?"

"No harm to him, be assured of that," replied Jack, quickly. "He is now living in a poor cottage. He will be taken to a mansion, and be waited upon by liveried servants. He will be delicately treated."

"That sounds well. What have I for my work?"

"Five hundred dollars for your services, if you get him away without making any alarm, and place him safely in my custody."

"I am your man. What is to be done?"

"To-night, I will leave Jesse Lings' at nightfall, and will be where you like to appoint at midnight."

"Over there is an old oak-tree," said Jim; "can you see it?"

"Yes."

"Half-a-mile beyond Jesse Lings' house on the main road, there's a blind path that leads up to it. At twelve o'clock to-night I'll be under the tree with the boy."

"And I with the five hundred dollars."

"Agreed; it's a bargain."

"A bargain."

CHAPTER IX.

When Milroy Falcon led Grace toward the plantation of black pines, she was filled with painful feelings of astonishment, he was conducting her to precincts fenced round with so much mystery.

Her position at Falcon Manor, from its strangely anomalous character, was sufficiently perplexing to a mind like hers. The perplexity, it must be remembered, was not one of mere wonder, but it was allied to an anxious trouble respecting her real title to the part she was playing there. Often, when Ora conversed with her in confidential familiarity, or Roderick addressed her with deferential attention, the thought "How know you but that you are a child rescued from rags and wretchedness?" would ring through her brain, and she would feel a scorching blush rise up to her temples in very shame at the deception which, if the suggestion had any foundation in truth, she was then practicing.

Now she felt that Milroy Falcon was about to question her upon her past life. How was she to answer him? She abhorred the very notion of uttering a false story, yet she shrank from admitting that she had come to Falcon Manor as the only surviving member of one branch of the old family and an heiress, when she was, perhaps, the daughter of the hated Ross, and penniless as the poorest beggar that ever clamored for admission within the walls of the poorhouse.

As she slowly accompanied Milroy Falcon, her brain was oppressed by crowding thoughts, all bearing on this point; so much, indeed, was she distracted by them

that it was not until the deepening gloom thickened around her that she aroused from her anxious rumination, and found that she was walking between the tall sombre branches of the black pines. An intimidating awe oppressed her, as they plunged deeper into the recesses of this dark and dismal wood; yet an eager and intense curiosity was aroused, and she would not have gone back for worlds.

A silence as of death reigned around; the song of the birds was no longer heard, nor the enlivening hum of the insects. The ground beneath was soft and damp, and a path there seemed none; yet Milroy Falcon threaded his way through the intricate passages formed by the tall, straight, dull-red pine columns without hesitation and with evident practised knowledge. He neither spoke nor paused until they abruptly came upon a small antique stone building, blackened by time and by the damp humid air which the sun's warmth never reached.

The exterior of this edifice was not unlike the appearance of a small chapel, yet it had partly the character of a cenotaph which had been erected to the memory of one who had died in some gloomy manner. The architecture was of the severe, undecorated, Gothic style. It was time-worn, moss-stained, crumbling to decay; and in its situation most grim and desolate.

As Grace's eye fell upon it she instinctively shuddered, every nerve thrilled painfully; not with fear or apprehension of evil to herself, but rather from an excited sense that some revelation, strange, important, but pertinent to her yet unfathomed history, would now be made to her.

Before an iron-bound oaken door Milroy Falcon stopped, and turning to Grace, said:

"You will not fear to trust yourself with me alone in a gloomy crypt?"

"With you, Mr. Falcon, I presume I may trust myself in safety in any spot," she answered, in firm tones. "Nevertheless, though not superior to certain superstitious influences, I am equal to any actual danger I might have to encounter."

He placed his hand upon one of the iron bands with which the door was faced, and forced it into a perpendicular position. Then pushing open the door, and beckoning Grace to follow, he entered.

She followed him into the building, and he closed the door behind her. For an instant the darkness seemed impenetrable; but presently Grace became conscious of a pale blue light, which was admitted by a small aperture above. The rays fell upon a spot in the centre of the space.

"Remain motionless for a moment," he said. "Summon your self-possession to your aid, and we will then proceed."

Grace cast her eyes around. Proceed where?

By degrees her sight adapted itself to the mere semi-darkness, and she detected where the ray of light rested a narrow circular opening; a moment more and she could perceive that a flight of stone steps led to some place beneath where they stood.

Mr. Falcon laid his cold hands on her.

"Are you ready?" he said.

She was not without a feeling of dread, but she did not hold back, or by any hesitation of manner betray what her emotions really were.

Milroy Falcon advanced to the opening and descended the steps slowly, carefully guiding Grace until

the last step was reached: then he led her forward a few steps, and abruptly released her hand.

With surprise she found herself in what appeared to be a very ancient crypt, lighted at its eastern end—from what source was not clear—by a stained-glass window of most brilliant colors, upon which was represented with exquisite skill the figure of a young, fair, and beautiful girl, with flowing hair. The face was pale; the eyes, large and blue, were fixed with pensive gaze upon the beholder; the small lips were slightly apart, as though she were speaking; one hand was raised heavenward, the other pointing direct to those who looked upon it. The figure was dressed in flowing robes of delicate hue. Upon the bosom, near the heart, there appeared a ghastly wound; and the light which illuminated the window, kept in motion by some unseen arrangement, gave to the blood depicted issuing from her side, the aspect of yet welling from its life-source. Above the head appeared the words in brilliant rich ruby characters:

"*Remember thou that I am avenged!*"

This remarkable figure was represented as standing amid long and waving grass, spangled and sparkling with the golden buttercup and the white daisy.

Near to her feet, beneath the shadow of the green grass, lay ready for a spring, a brilliant-eyed snake. Though represented motionless, its head was elevated, its mouth open, with its forked tongue out, and where its arrow point appeared to strike, the tall flowering weeds were blood-stained.

In a wavering hand below, as above the figure, were flame-colored characters; but they ran thus:

"*Anguis in herba.*"

Underneath this singular memorial window there stood a square tomb, upon which rested the recumbent figure of a young girl. It was sculptured in marble, and represented the same young creature so exquisitely portrayed in the illuminated window; there were the same flowing garments, the same sad, sad features.

There was nothing else within the gloomy crypt, except that the bosses of the groined, arched roof, bore upon them the same face as that pained, grieved countenance, which gazed down from the stained casement, and the walls were hung with alternate strips of black and crimson cloth.

Before the wondering eyes of Grace had absorbed all the objects in the mysterious scene, Mr. Falcon advanced to the tomb, and kneeling upon a block of stone, bent his head devoutly in silent prayer. He remained for a minute, and then rising, returned slowly to where Grace was standing, entranced, gazing upon the pallid face which seemed to look down upon her with such piteous and appealing earnestness.

"Miss Montrose, you are surprised at what you behold!"

"Oppressed with wonder," she replied, in a low tone.

"This is not an age for the marvelous," he continued; "yet, Grace, there are few great families which have not within the inner circle of their life some living record of the past, which to the world abroad would appear a mystery. We have our landmarks, and retain our traditions. Travel east and west, from the sea-bound south to the icy regions of the north, and you will find that the oldest families have some grim prophecy which, though in these days of unbelief they

are laughed at as chimeras, nevertheless are as sternly and rigidly fulfilled as the foretold eclipse. An ancestor has laid Falcon Manor under a bane of this kind, and the best and brightest of our race, since the hour in which he perpetrated his cruel and iniquitious deed, have been mercilessly stricken down in rigorous exactness with the condition it involves."

"And what is this fatal curse?" inquired Grace, her questioning eyes still fastened on the transparent figure, with its weeping, ghastly wound.

"Look there and read, '*Anguis in herba.*'"

"A snake in the grass!" she repeated.

"Even so," he ejaculated. "The spell upon the Falcons is comprised in that metaphor. He who slew one so young and fair as she who now gazes upon us with an air of such acute anguish, was the first of our race who enacted the dishonorable and contemptible part thus typically portrayed."

"And the girl—was she a Falcon?"

"A Montrose," he replied, fixing his eyes upon her steadfastly.

A strange gleam, almost unearthly, shot from them. Grace felt disturbed by it, yet she said nothing, but looked up once more at the painted face.

Suddenly Mr. Falcon, who had followed the direction of her eyes, said to her:

"Know you not the face?"

"No," she returned.

"Are you sure?"

"I have a confused notion that I have somewhere seen it, yet I know it not."

"Yet you have seen it many, many times."

"I?"

"Even you."

"I do not recollect where or when."

"Yet you are a Montrose!"

Grace felt her cheeks become the hue of crimson.

"Still, I am not reminded by that circumstance how to make clear my confused impression that it is not familiar to my eyes."

He settled his large, dark eyes upon her face.

"Listen to me," he exclaimed. "When Mildred Dupont, the favorite child of my father's favorite sister, my kind, ever thoughtful, trusted cousin, and your —but you know your consanguinity too well for me to repeat it—when she told me of your sad bereavement, of your lone condition, and that she had sent for you to come to Falcon Manor, I conceived that you were changing your mausoleum for a graveyard, we were so dull here; and I felt—I know not why or how—that to me your coming was rather an addition to its dullness, a something to increase my ineradicable sadness."

"Ineradicable?"

"Under certain conditions—but of that another time. Let me proceed by telling you that you came here upon a day inauspicious to our race, and then I felt that I had rather you would not come at all."

"Mr. Falcon, why not have recalled the invitation?"

"Your pardon, Grace, you have no cause for offense. Mere relatives or friends—few they are—might have come and gone. Their absence would have been a matter of indifference to me—yours was not. I had not seen you yet here." He pressed his clenched hand upon his breast. "Here the note of your advent was sounded from the hour that Mildred first mentioned your name; I wondered much when I looked in amazement upon your face."

"My face, Mr. Falcon?" she echoed, in surprise.

"Yes, Grace, your face—that face!" he almost shrieked, as he pointed to the sad countenance of the girl painted on the window. "That face!" as his thin, long fingers turned to the marble features of the figure resting upon the tomb. "And that—and that—and that!" he added, pointing to the bosses upon the ribs of the arched roof. "That face, never absent from my eyes—never—never!"

He covered his own with his hands.

Grace, with astonishment, turned her eyes upon the painted face. She saw the likeness now.

"Yet, I am dark, and she is so—oh, so very fair and beautiful!"

Milroy Falcon lifted up his face.

"The lineaments are the same," he said. "When I saw you first, it was as though you had risen up from your tomb and presented yourself at my tomb; a spasm seemed to wring my heart. And upon the day—of all others in the year—the eventful day! You came, it was clear, by a decree of inevitable fate. It is for me to unfathom what your advent here portends; it is for this I have brought you here to confer; it is for this I have unfolded a secret, hidden to all other eyes but yours——"

"And mine!" exclaimed a voice, close to them.

Grace felt the blood rush back to her heart. She did not fly; she did not shriek; she turned ashy pale, yet she stood firmly erect, like a figure carved in stone. Milroy Falcon recoiled several steps. Both he and Grace turned their eyes in the direction whence the sound came, and beheld within a few feet of them, standing with an air of cold dignity, Mildred Dupont.

A silence unbroken by sound of any kind, followed this discovery. Grace was greatly surprised; for she

had not heard a footfall, nor even the rustle of a woman's dress to denote Mildred's approach. It was as though she had uprisen from the earth to confront them.

Mr. Falcon seemed disconcerted by her presence. She had evidently some powerful influence over him; a look, a word, reduced him to passive obedience—not that the influence was of a derogatory character, or the obedience unworthy his manliness; Mildred was careful not to impart to it a tone which would make him resent the power she assumed, or even feel that it was a power that she exercised—but Grace plainly saw that there was a secret control, springing from some hidden source; that its nature was grave and mysterious; and that while Mildred used her acquired power with deep-sighted skill, Milroy bent to it from motives which probably had some far mightier consideration than merely prudent discretion.

She felt that her hand was taken and firmly grasped by Mildred Dupont, and she heard her cold calm voice say:

"This is no place for you, Grace; we will return to the mansion. Milroy Falcon——"

"Her cousin, Mildred," he said, in a husky voice.

"Your cousin be it, Grace," continued Mildred, in the same even voice. "Milroy has been premature in his revelations. You can scarcely be prepared for a scene so strange as this—could hardly anticipate an introduction to a subterranean mausoleum so strangely decorated, or to be invited to listen to histories so enwoven with exaggerated superstition—and you had need of all your strong sense and clear intelligence to escape being mystified and awe-stricken without a true

object, and therefore without justice, and scarcely without cruelty!"

"Mildred, you are severe in your imputations," cried Milroy, hastily. "You overlook——"

"Nothing, Milroy. Especially do I remember that there are babblers and tattlers around Falcon Manor; that the plantation of the black pines is not so freely visited but that the circumstance of a young girl having been seen to enter it alone with you—with you, Milroy Falcon, you will reflect—will afford subject for the gossiping censorious for miles around."

"Who would dare to breathe an insinuation——?"

"Not in your hearing, perhaps, Milroy, but people dare and do whisper slanders when the slandered are not by."

"Yet we were not seen to enter here together; there were none to observe the path we took."

"I saw you, to my amazement; Ora—her brother—I know not who else. The world is not very charitable, Milroy, and——"

"Again, Mildred, your imputations become offensive."

"I regret it, Milroy, but it is necessary that I should be truthful in this matter. I repeat, you committed an error in bringing here one who innocently may find herself the subject of conversation, scarcely of a desirable kind, to the whole county; and who, if it were not so, has no claim to be here."

"No claim! Look at her face, Mildred, and then look there!" He pointed to the stained window. "See you not the extraordinary resemblance? Look well at the features of Grace again, and tell me if they are not the counterpart of——"

"Hush! beware! Milroy Falcon, remember what you

would say. You are wholly mistaken in the impression you have formed. You are misled by a fancied resemblance. Grace has no claim to the ancestry your overheated imagination has assigned her. There runs not in her veins the life-stream which can claim direct descent from her whose blood is there depicted as overflowing—in whose memory this miserable and fatal pageant has been constructed. Do not prolong this discussion—here, at least. Let this misapprehension rest here where it does. Grace has unintentionally been led into a part of what appears to be a mysterious secret of an old aristocratic family. She will swear to keep it concealed—will you not, Grace?"

"No!"

"No! why?"

"I have seen and heard too much, or not enough. I am no idle, foolish talker, nor do I possess the weakness of talebearing; but I do not know how far I may be really interested in the imperfect revelation I have heard, or the singular representation I behold. I reserve to myself the right of remaining silent or speaking respecting what has here passed, as events may demand."

"I can answer for her discretion. We will forget what has happened, for there will not be—there cannot be—an occasion arise which will call upon her to reveal what has been entrusted to her under the misapprehension that she is what she seems."

Grace started as though her heart had been pierced with a barb. She felt her throat swell to suffocation. How keenly she felt her position—how deeply the allusion to it! She detected in an instant that Mildred had power over her too, and knew how to use it with equal skill to that she exercised over Milroy Falcon.

"Come, Grace, let us go. You have been here too long. You should not have come here."

She took the reluctant hand of Grace, and led her toward the winding stairs; while Milroy Falcon, casting for an instant a fixed look on Grace, turned from her with an aspect of mournful abstraction. He slowly advanced to the tomb, and bowed his head over it in an attitude of sorrowing thought.

In the meanwhile, Mildred, in silence, conducted Grace from the gloomy building. Once more she found herself in the depths of the black woods, the dark tree-tops shutting out the blue sky and the white fleecy clouds, and only sufficient light penetrating the high overhanging boughs to make the place around look drear, dismal, and provocative of superstitious fancies.

Mildred pursued her way through the tree-columned aisles, as much mistress of the route as Milroy Falcon had shown himself to be. She moved at a quick pace, crushing the rank weeds into the soft earth beneath her firm tread, and pausing not, though Grace soon knew by her short breathing that they were ascending.

Winding through the intricate perplexities of the plantation, they reached a spot darker and gloomier than any they had yet traversed.

Here Mildred paused, and leaned against a tree, apparently exhausted by her exertions. Grace was glad of the rest, for she, too, felt fatigued by what she had undergone. Still there was so much of marvel in the events she had shared in that morning, that bodily weakness was quite controlled by the strain on her mental faculties.

Mildred Dupont did not break the silence; but

having recovered her breath, she beckoned to Grace to follow her, and dived into an entangled grove, the thin stems of pine shooting up being so close together as to scarce leave room to pass.

Darker and blacker the way grew, for they passed beneath the overarching boughs of dark, ivy-covered laurel, trained to form a roof all but impenetrable to light; and after pursuing its windings a short distance, an abrupt turn brought them into the broad glare of daylight.

So dazzling was the change that Grace uttered a cry of pain, and placed her hands before her eyes. Mildred put her arm around her waist, and impelled her forward, stopping only as Grace found herself able to distinguish the objects around her.

They stood upon the centre of a high hill, which rose above the tops of the black pines, and far higher than the centre tower of Falcon Manor.

"Be seated, Grace. It was on this spot the founder of Falcon Manor selected the site of his home, which his descendants have held intact ever since. Here he stood and conceived the grand seat of his home. With this spot on which we stand, many of the most important traditions of our house are identified. I have chosen it in order that I may explain to you more clearly than I have yet done the relation in which you and I stand to each other; to give you a glimmer of what may be looming in the future, and to prepare you for the position you will henceforth occupy; or display most clearly the alternative which follows obstinate noncompliance with my views."

The words of Mildred, uttered in clear tones, thrilled the nerves of Grace, and with a strange feeling of awe she sat down to listen, her eyes fastened upon the

plantation of black pines, as though she each moment expected to hear rise from them the wild unearthly cry which had on the eve of the new year, so mystified and bewildered her.

CHAPTER X.

JACK DUKE, upon parting with Jim Hanks, directed his steps toward Jesse Lings' house. He seemed wrapped in deep contemplation, and appeared to be making his way across the fields to Jesse's house rather by instinct than from attention he was paying to the route he was following.

"I don't feel satisfied with the situation," he muttered. "My very keen friend from the East gave me a pretty close description of crafty Jesse Lings, the risks I should run, and the way to deal with him and them. They have not turned out as I shaped them, a circumstance which has partly arisen from my own carelessness of precaution. What a full-grown jackass a man must be who, being at the entrance of a hornet's nest, stirs it up without reflecting whether he will be let off unstung! Yet that is just what I did. Cheek by jowl with some connection of the Lanes, I must even in wanton boastfulness let slip that it was I who put a bullet through the head of Jed Lane; in consequence of which I obtain occupation for the whole evening and night, and raise a suspicion I will find it infernally hard to put down. Again, I have muddled this interview with old Burdell. My object was to draw him, not as if he was a badger, but as a surly dog would be by tempting bait; instead of which I must blurt out Whitney Falcon Burdell's name, up-

set the scheme, and get all but kicked out of his cottage for my want of skill, and I have employed this Jim Hanks; I have let out my object to him before I am at all assured that his cupidity will get the better of his loyalty to his tribe. Gold makes a good skin-plaster, but I have hardly given him enough to heal the sore of being drubbed in the presence of a young and pretty woman, who it is very certain he does not regard with indifference. What if to-night he meets me with a score of fellows of his fraternity, and after well mauling me, strings me up to a tree by way of summary retaliation? The contingency is by no means remote. I don't think that I should be altogether an infant of fatuity if I were, on reaching the residence of Mr. Lings, to call for my bill and without waiting for my dinner, unequivocally make my way back to New York, leaving to my friend, the 'Star of the East,' all the glory of his precious enterprise. Ha! but then he would claim all the reward, the very thing I have decided on doing. No, Mr. Whitney Burdell will pay well, and so will—Hallo! what is the matter at Mr. Lings' establishment? There is a swarm of gipsies around his hive."

Jack Duke crouched beneath a laurel bush, and then crawled from one bush to another until he had drawn near enough to the house to be able to see the faces of a mob of some twenty or thirty men straggling round the door.

"Gipsies, by the Genius of Plunder! There stands hulking Swift Lane! Fortunate cherub that I am to be here! That villain has sworn to show how nimbly I can dance upon the unsubstantial air, when I afford him the opportunity. What if he knows I am a guest of Jesse Lings, and with his brothers in petty larceny,

now awaits my return to demonstrate to the very quintessence of proof that I, aided only by a single string, can rival the dainty Ariel of Shakespeare, and dance i' th' air? I am convinced of this, that intentionally I shall be no party to such performances; and here I remain until that band of primitive socialists retire, or it grows dark enough for me to slip away unperceived."

Jack watched all that was going on, and drew his conclusions from what he observed.

There were women mingled with the men, and there was evidently some excitement among the whole party—but how originated? He had not long to wait; the whole party left the house, and made direct for the spot where he was lying hidden.

To rise up and make his way across the open fields would be only to give himself into their hands.

He distinctly heard the irregular beat of their feet as they drew nearer to him, but he dared not look out for fear that he would be instantly detected by eyes that rarely slumbered when treading such ground. As they probably were in search of a foe, he only and devoutly hoped they had no dog with them. If they had, the brute would be sure to run snuffing among the bushes, to come across him, when he would give the gipsies the scent to a certainty.

At the very moment his anxiety rose to the highest point of intensity the foot-tramp began to grow fainter, and after a short time ceased altogether. The gipsies had diverged and struck away to the left to where their encampment stood.

Cautiously raising his head, he found this to be the fact; and, as soon as he could do so with safety, he left

his lurking-place, and crawled from bush to bush until he was a short distance from the house.

He saw then that the door stood open, and with a sudden bound he sprang over the open space, darted into the house, and ran into the arms of Nan Lings. She uttered a cry of surprise, as he flung himself into a chair.

She regarded him attentively for a minute, and then raising her finger left the room.

Presently she returned, and fixing her dark brilliant eyes upon his flushed face, slowly folded her arms. "What!" she exclaimed with a curling lip, "has the rabbit hunted the hound?"

"Look ye, Mrs. Lings, a stag at bay don't stand much chance with a pack of hounds. Give him fair play and he can give a good account of himself; but set a lot of hungry devils upon him, and how is he to defend himself with success? Now, I don't mind tackling four or five, but two dozen I decidedly object to. I don't approve of your thinking I have run like a cur in fear of those from whom I have fled; I would have you to believe that I have objects of great importance to accomplish, and I have no intention to risk their success, by a lack of discretion, arising out of foolhardiness. I fear no man living, my beauty, nor even strong odds, but I must confess that I give in to twenty to one."

"You were bold enough, in truth, to Hanks, and he is no chicken."

"Bold to all men, and not easily defeated; but by beauty readily conquered."

"Beauty!"

"Yes, such as yours!"

"Do you think me handsome?"

"Handsome as Cleopatra."

"Who is she?"

"Who was she, you should say! She was an Egyptian queen, or something of that sort, who reigned about two thousand years ago, or thereabouts. She was probably one of your ancestors, and beautiful enough to make a man fling away the world for her."

"The world!—how could he do that?"

"Well—that is—you see—it is too long to explain now, but he did do it."

"Have you seen her picture?"

"Yes."

"Am I like her?"

"You are better looking than her picture."

"You are treating me like some fool of a young lady."

"By no means; I say, in my eyes you are better looking. You are not bound to believe me if you don't like."

"I should like to believe you; I have often been told of my good looks, but then only by rough, ignorant fellows, such as Hanks. I believe you if you mean it."

Jack placed his hand upon his heart as a proof.

Her glittering eyes were fastened upon his all the while, with a degree of earnestness with which he could not fail to be struck.

"I believe you now," she said; and after a moment's thought she added: "I suppose, if you really do think me handsome, you could in time like me?"

"Where is Jesse Lings?" asked Jack, with a quick glance into the bar-room.

"He has gone down the road, and won't be here for half an hour."

"You are sure?"

"Sure!"

"Now let me tell you, beauty and tenderness ought to go hand in hand," exclaimed Jack, drawing up close to her, and laying his hand upon hers. "When I made my appearance here last night, I was very much struck by your expressively handsome face, but I was no less affected by the fierceness with which you regarded me and the evident readiness with which you seemed disposed to see me sent to the land of the shadows——"

"Ah, but then——"

"Wait—let me finish. Now I look in your face, and my heart leaps into a liking for you; but then, it must always be turned toward me with an expression as free from ferocity as it is now."

"It shall be, I swear!"

"Then I will like you with all my heart; and in proof of a fair commencement of my liking you, wear this for my sake."

He produced, as he spoke, a small locket handsomely chased.

She took it from his hands, and looked at it with admiring eyes; then turning them upon his, she said, in full tones:

"It shall rest where no man's gift was ever before placed—next to my heart."

He pressed her hand, and said:

"Now, Mrs. Lings——"

"Call me Nan, that is my name."

"A very pretty one too; but Mr. Lings——"

"Is as jealous as a tiger. He would murder you if he knew even of your gift to me; but call me Nan when we are alone."

"Well then, Nan, I believe that you are well disposed to serve me truly and frankly."

"Have I not given you my hand on it. When did you ever know one of my race to do that and play false afterwards?"

"I put strong faith in you, and will continue to do so until I have the strongest proofs that you have betrayed me, and broken your sworn word."

"Betray you! Oh, you do not know me! Time will show."

"It will," responded Jack.

He then proceeded artfully to question her respecting the presence of the men at the house a short time back, and the cause of the excitement they had exhibited.

"Hanks was at the bottom of that," she replied. "He went to the tents last night, after you had flung him beneath the elm, and returned with some of the men to kill you in your bed. I saved you from them."

"You did. Did Jesse know beforehand of their visit?" asked Jack.

"No, he got them away by agreeing to a plan."

"What plan?" asked Jack, quickly.

"One of which I tried to warn you this morning."

"When you were so cool and distant to me?" he exclaimed.

"I was at the time under the threat of being murdered if I spoke or even looked at you," she replied.

"Be kind enough to give me the details of the plot," he said.

"That is soon done," she returned. "Hanks, on the pretence of leading you to old Mr. Burdell's, was to guide you among the tents. You would have been there seized. If you had been proved to be the man

who shot my brother Jed, you would have been there and then strung up to a tree. If you had been, as Jesse suspected you to be, a thief catcher, they would have cut your throat."

"What an agreeable alternative! How unfortunate that I should happen to be neither the man who shot Jed Lane, nor the thief catcher. The first I might have easily been if he had tried to rob and murder me; the second I could never be, for I have the most wholesome horror of the officious scoundrels. The name of one makes the very joints in my backbone crack."

"I am glad to hear this," exclaimed Nan Lings, with an emotion scarcely less joyful than Hanks displayed.

"I apprehend that Mr. Lings scarcely expected me back here to dine," observed Jack, with a sneer.

"Oh, no, he has gone down to some horse dealer in the hollow to see if he cannot dispose of your horse. If he is able to sell it he will bring the buyer back with him."

"This settlement of myself and my affairs is too touching," replied Jack, between his teeth. "I am afraid I can only repay it by mounting my nag, and departing before he returns."

"I am sure that will be the best step for you to take. You must be very quick or you will be too late."

"As nimble as a vaulter will I be, but one word; Hanks—can I trust him?"

"No."

"Yet he is one of your race and he gave me his hand upon a compact."

"Did he so? you may trust him as far as your compact goes, but no further."

"Enough, will you see to my gripsack? I will bring my horse round to the door myself."

"You will remember that what I have told you about Jesse is in confidence. You will never let him know, or my life will answer for it."

"Be under no fear. I must employ him, and therefore will be civil to him; but I am well-armed against him now. He might have deceived me had you not spoken—now I defy him."

He took her hand as he concluded and pressed it to his lips, and then rapidly gave utterance to burning words, expressive of the strong sense he entertained of the services she had rendered him; and though outwardly he might be compelled by circumstances to pay court to others of her sex, henceforth she would be the only woman who really possessed his heart.

Jack made his way to the stable, and quickly saddled his horse. He lost no time, for he anticipated the return of Jesse Lings, and just now he did not desire to look him in the face. And when he led the cob round to the front entrance, he found Nan ready with his gripsack.

He leaped into the saddle, and placing his leather case before him, handed her some money, for as he said, the entertainment the house afforded him.

"Tell Lings that I shall probably be back here in a few days; and intimate to him that it will be to his interest to act on the square with me, and it will be to his injury to play tricks with me."

"I will tell—you *will* be back here again soon?"

"I will," he said.

"I know it," she ejaculated.

For a moment she was silent, but suddenly she raised her hand, and in a low tone said,

"From this hour to our last your fate and mine commingle; for weal or woe, for prosperity or wretched-

ness, for joy or despair, our destinies are inseparably interwoven."

A creeping sensation of apprehension stole over Jack Duke as the words fell upon his ears and he witnessed her excitement, but he would not let her see how it affected him. He laughed and said:

"Be it so; the happier fellow I, to have one so young and handsome clinging to me like a vine about my heart."

He laughed, kissed his hand to her, plunged spurs sharply into his horse's flanks, and galloped away.

About a mile away he met Jesse Lings and a rough looking fellow, dressed in the height of fashion, horse jockey's effect, hurrying on toward Lings' home. When Jack reined in his cob to speak to him, it is doubtful if man ever looked more disconcerted than Jesse did.

Jack took no notice of his astonishment, but spoke to him frankly, informed him that an unexpected incident had suddenly called him away, but that he would return, as he should have need of his future services, and that he would amply remunerate him. He, however, as he concluded, beckoned Lings to one side, and whispered in his ear.

Lings started and caught the bridle in his hands.

"Why did you not mention his name at first? Come back, everything shall be right now."

"No, I will keep on now, but I don't know how soon I may need your help and services; and I have thought it best—as I have, not from what has happened, had the strongest faith in your good intentions toward me—to mention that name in order to guard against future misunderstandings. You won't mistake me any more. My bill at your house is paid."

Again the spurs were dug into the sides of the cob,

who snorted and plunged forward, and Mr. Lings and the mystified customer for the cob were left behind.

As Jack continued his ride he looked out for the place for the midnight rendezvous, and saw in the distance the giant tree standing. He had forgotten to notice the blind path of which Hanks had spoken, but unless the night proved very dark, which it did not promise to be, he believed he should have no difficulty in finding it.

His faith in Hanks was slight, yet he could not believe that he would resist the prospect of obtaining five hundred dollars so very easily.

"As for foul play, well, I am playing for high stakes, and I must run the risk. A steady hand with a hair trigger is strong defence. With one dead man before their eyes, men hesitate to rush to make the next. If Hanks does turn treacherous I will not miss him; he shall have all the lead out of one barrel—on that I am determined."

He lingered in the wood that skirted one side of the road until near the hour for his rendezvous with Hanks, muttering to himself how cold and hungry he was. He had not eaten anything since morning.

By dint of a slow and careful examination, he discovered the blind path that led to the oak-tree; and as he was uncertain of the ground he had to traverse, he dismounted and led his horse. At a short distance from the place of meeting he saw a clump of trees, to which he directed his steps. He quickly picked out a place where he could remain unseen, and yet observe what might be going on in the neighborhood of the oak-tree.

The hour of midnight approached without any dark figure stealing beneath the shadows of the trees greet-

ing his watchful eye, and he began to entertain strong notions that his fellow conspirator would act up to his engagement.

"And then let me but get the child, Harold Burdell, safely into my keeping. By Jove! what terms I will exact! How I will set the two interested parties bidding——"

At this moment the wind bore to his ears, though faintly, the hour of midnight tolled by some distant church clock. He listened breathlessly; and when it had ceased everything around remained as silent and still as before.

"Not here," he muttered; "he has not succeeded. Still he ought to have been—Ha!"

A hand was laid upon the bridle of his horse by a man who seemed to rise out of the ground. Jack clapped his hand upon his pistol, and pointed it at the man's head.

"Who are you?" he said.

The man uttered a guttural laugh.

"Hanks," he answered, in a low tone; and added: "Don't you know me again?"

"Where's the boy?" asked Jack, quickly.

"Where's the money?"

"Where you can place your hand on it, the moment you produce the boy."

"You have got it with you, of course."

"Mr. Hanks, I was not born yesterday or the day before; I mean to be fair and square with you; I will keep my word faithfully, and do all I undertake. You have shaken hands in true faith with me, and I expect you not to break a gipsy's word by palm to palm; but if you play me falsely I'll shoot you through the head

though I swing from the branch of a tall tree the next instant."

"Enough said, mister, I have shaken hands with you on your agreement. Wait a moment, and I will bring the boy to you."

"And I will be ready with the money."

Hanks disappeared; and Jack's heart beat with excitement as the consummation of his hopes drew near. He plunged his hand into a secret pocket in his overcoat and brought forth a roll of bills.

Hanks soon reappeared, bearing in his arms a large burden, muffled in a rough, heavy horse-blanket.

"Here he is," he exclaimed, in a low tone.

"Place him before me, and let me see his face," returned Jack. "Lift him up—so."

Hanks did as he was told, and then Jack removed the horse-blanket from the boy's head. He cast his eyes eagerly upon the boy's wild, pale, frightened face, and was satisfied that he really had in his possession the much coveted prize.

The boy, as soon as he could breathe, uttered a shrill cry, but Jack placed his hand over his mouth.

"Harold Burdell," he said, "don't be afraid, you are with a friend who will be kind to you. Don't be alarmed, my boy; you will be happier and safer than you ever have been."

But the boy struggled, and would not be quieted, and Jack was compelled to stifle his cries by recovering him with the blanket.

He handed the money to Hanks.

"There is your money," he said.

"What, in this little roll?" cried Hanks.

"Open it and count it," said Jack, grating his teeth;

for the boy writhed and struggled so he could scarce hold him.

Hanks did as he was told, and with a chuckle of intense gratification he exclaimed:

"All right, mister; we've both done the right thing by each other. Good-night."

He was about to disappear, but Jack stopped him.

"I want to go to the depot, how can I avoid passing the Lings house?"

"Look here," replied Hanks; "follow this piece of open, it will lead to a narrow road through the bushes; then you gets into the open again, and so on to the road turn to the left."

"Good-night," cried Jack; and striking his spurs into the cob, dashed along the path pointed out to him, and plunged into the dark bushes at what seemed a reckless gallop, holding close the yet struggling boy, Harold Burdell.

CHAPTER XI.

MILDRED DUPONT, before she commenced the revelations she had promised, gazed around her with a proud air, as though the magnificent landscape her eyes took in at a glance, acknowledged her as its mistress.

There was a remarkable air of triumphant grandeur in her survey; yet it was but for a moment—it faded as her glance fell upon Falcon Manor; it changed into a sombre expression as her eyes glided upon the black pines, and there rested.

Mildred cleared her voice after some reflection, and commenced:

"Your nature, Grace—and by that I mean the com-

position of your character—is not what I had calculated it would prove to be. The moulding to which it has been subjected has been attended with a result wholly opposite to that intended. You have been driven—you should have been led. Had the latter course been adopted you would have been ready to yield, obedience would have been to you a virtue. Now a proposition is by you at first encountered in a spirit of antagonism and wrestled with until you have convinced yourself that it may be yielded by you without prejudice to your present situation or your future condition; then you give way."

"Is not that a prudent course?"

"In your own interests, yes," returned Mildred. "But, in our relations with the world, there are other interests we must consult as well as our own. I would not have you lose sight of yourself, but I would not have you shut out all others, retaining only yourself in your field of view. I have told you that you are my secret; you are, but I forbid you to speculate in what manner this is to be explained. Wait patiently, until I tell you the secret at the fitting hour. You can lose nothing by it, your gain will be brilliant."

"But my parents!"

"Have patience, girl. In the eyes of the world you are a Montrose and an heiress."

"An orphan?" said Grace, quickly.

"In the eyes of the world! You will continue to reside with me, the world will learn, because in your condition I am your natural guardian," she continued. "You will maintain your position and be supplied with money——"

"By whom?"

"By me will the means of supporting your apparent

rank be furnished, and until you find one with a better right, or until your pride has true reason to revolt at accepting them, make no difficulty in receiving them. As a matter of course, I foresee that I shall have trouble with you; that there will be a struggle between my imperative acts—with which you cannot avoid being identified—and your self-will; but be it my task to settle that difficulty. I must control, or we must separate. Has it occurred to you to suggest to yourself a consequence of such separation?"

"No."

"Let me inform you; you would have to return to Ross."

"Never!"

"Mark me, Grace, the alternative of leaving me is to return to the companionship of Oscar Ross, from which no power but mine can deliver you!"

"Not the law of the land?"

"Not the law."

"He has no claim on me."

"The law would afford it him. You have no escape."

"Death."

"You would not be permitted the alternative. The power which has placed you in his hands would keep you there; you would be too closely watched for your self-will to have room to act."

"I am to understand that I am chained, enslaved, powerless to act, a puppet in your hands, to move and direct only as you direct?"

"You are to understand that your happiness is in your own hands. You may move in brilliant circles, be admired, courted, married even to rank as well as wealth, but there is alone a track which can lead to

these results; and there is the alternative—destitution, misery and degradation, without hope of escape."

"You say that I am a Montrose."

"And so, for the value of that consideration, is Oscar Ross," she answered. "You have seen how nobly he sustains the family honor; and you cannot rise up from your seat and vow that you have not that man's blood coursing through your proud, swelling veins."

An agonized sob burst from the lips of Grace, and she buried her face in her hands.

Mildred bent over the cowering girl, and in a soothing voice said:

"We will let our discourse on this part of our subject end here. Let me impress upon you not to divert the inevitable progress of events, or to imagine that you can accomplish such a task. A straw may divert for a moment—the water accumulates, bursts over the impediment, becomes a torrent, and sweeps away the obstruction with it. Wait, seek to control your destiny and it will hurl you to perdition."

Grace threw back her head, dashed the scalding tears from her eyes, and exclaimed in a tone impossible to describe:

"I will wait my time!"

"Very good!" responded Mildred, in a low tone.

Then she turned her face to Grace, and in a voice free from all hesitation, said:

"Now for the mystery of this morning."

Grace turned her eyes eagerly upon her and for the moment forgot her own uncertain and unsatisfactory condition in her desire to learn from Mildred's lips the revelation which she was on the point of hearing from the mouth of Milroy Falcon. Mildred took her hand.

"First let me assure you that in what you have seen

there is nothing of the supernatural, not much of the marvelous, but something, I admit unusual; yet even that I might recall; for examine into the old families that surround us and you will find that within their records and within the walls of the mansions are secrets of weighty gravity, and relics of a terrifying nature, even as within Falcon Manor."

"Within Falcon Manor?" said Grace.

"Yes, you have seen but little of its mysteries as yet; but I repeat, it is not strange nor wonderful for great families to have a secret, wild mystic and terrible, carrying it down with all its evil consequences and its startling effects for years. The adage that 'There is a skeleton in every house,' is no false image, and it is true of Falcon Manor. Now listen, Grace; you were this morning conducted into an old crypt, in which there stood a tomb bearing the recumbent figure of a young girl; you also saw a memorial window, upon which was painted a semblance of——"

"Here we are, Ora, here we are. This is the spot, the centre of the—I beg ten thousand pardons, ladies. Ha! Miss Dupont, and the incomparable Miss Montrose. Oh, you have stolon a march on us. Most unkind to quietly visit this magnificent spot, and not to invite Ora and I to accompany you."

Grace turned her head away; she was too annoyed at the interruption to suffer the speech to touch her vanity. But Mildred in a quiet tone pointed out all the principal places within sight, and rendered her descriptions as interesting as possible by relating anecdotes of persons or incidents connected with many of the noteworthy spots by which they were surrounded. Her details were chosen with skill and enlarged upon until the purpose she had in view was ac-

complished; then she drew their attention to the fact that the hour of luncheon was long passed, and unless they hastened back, they would have barely time to dress for dinner.

Grace found the return was a long distance compared with the route by which Mildred had led her to the hill, and the sun was setting before the party entered the hall of the mansion. They were tired, and separated at once to dress for dinner. Mildred hurried to her room, and Grace had no opportunity of renewing the conversation which had been commenced on the top of the hill.

When they assembled at dinner she was hardly surprised to find that Milroy Falcon was absent, or to learn that he had been unexpectedly called to New York.

Neither was she amazed at hearing Mildred announce her intention of almost immediately following him to New York—thus terminating the visit of Ora and Roderick D'Olier at Falcon Manor—or to be told that she would be Mildred's companion in her journey to the city.

Grace had already formed many hopes and wishes respecting Falcon Manor and the mysterious crypt in the plantation of the black pines, but she also felt the necessity for silently biding her time.

In going to New York she had one fear, that of encountering Ross. After what Mildred had said, as well as intimated, she had become apprehensive of the man's power over her, and of the use he would make of it.

* * * * *

Two or three days after this, Grace found herself alone with Mildred in the same house, and in the same

room into which she had introduced her on the night of the parting from the now dreaded Oscar Ross.

Grace cast her eyes around her, and gazed upon the door of the sleeping-room in which she had cried herself to sleep on that night.

She turned to Mildred and pointed to the room.

"Is that to be my room during my stay here?"

"You came here in secret; you rested here unseen; you quitted clandestinely. Under those circumstances that room was your abiding-place. It is so no longer. You now arrive here as the cousin of Milroy Falcon, the heiress of a splendid fortune—your suite of rooms will be fitting your station. Forbear to ask more or to seek to learn further until the hour comes. As you have said, 'Bide your time.'"

Again, as before, when these words were uttered she seemed to dilate, and, with flashing eyes and a proudly curling lip, she ejaculated with earnestness:

"I will!"

Suddenly Milroy Falcon made his appearance in the house; and such had been the skillful operations of Mildred, that his presence—though it might have been looked for at any time—seemed to Grace abrupt and unexpected.

Everything that had happened had the appearance of being accidental, yet nothing occurred without design, or without having been produced by the skillful agency of Mildred Dupont.

One morning she said to Grace while at breakfast:

"I have accepted an invitation for you to-night. Mrs. Astor holds as brilliant assembly. I have cards. I will attend to your toilet myself; you must resign yourself to my direction and you will create a sensation."

Grace turned away thoughtfully. To her the power

to accomplish seemed to require no effort. Incited by a passion for music and dancing, to acquire both with ease was but a natural consequence.

Never before had the full appliances of art in dress been employed in decorating the well-formed, elegant figure of Grace; nor had the skill of the *coiffeur* been exercised with such taste and success.

When ready to depart, Mildred surveyed her with eyes gleaming with triumph.

"Grace," she exclaimed, in tones of singular exultation, "you are brilliantly beautiful."

Arriving at the Astor mansion they passed on into the ballroom. Grace trod the magnificent salon as though it had ever been her lot to move in such an atmosphere. She heard on all sides the whisper, "Who is she?" and forgetting the cheerless school-days, and the fetid garret of lower New York, she beheld the blazing lights, the glowing faces by which she was encompassed, impressed with the conviction that she was in her own sphere.

Suddenly she found herself face to face with Ora D'Olier, who warmly welcomed her, and Roderick, who greeted her with evident surprise at her brilliant appearance.

"Permit me, Grace, to do the honors of an introduction," as two elegant ladies came toward them. "Miss Dupont, Miss Montrose, permit me to present to you, Mrs. Whitney Burdell and Miss Dottie Burdell."

The eyes of the four ladies fastened upon each other with eager scrutiny; most of all did Mrs. Whitney Burdell and Grace scrutinize each other.

Mrs. Burdell, with a sudden impulse, took the hand of Grace, and pressed it with a warmth far beyond the

mode of the usual salutation: the act itself was most uncommon, and it drew Grace's special attention.

"I am pleased with this introduction, Miss Montrose, it will gratify me to extend the acquaintance. I am convinced that I will like you very much."

"The feeling is mutual," said Grace, in a low tone.

At this moment Roderick beckoned to a gentleman, who rapidly approached, and instantly said:

"Miss Montrose, I have the honor to introduce to you my old and esteemed friend, Wilton Granger."

Grace, raising her eyes, saw before her the face which Mildred had drawn her attention to on the night she had left Ross, and which she said she should never forget.

CHAPTER XII.

JACK DUKE had found his partner in abduction, Jim Hanks, had directed him by an exceedingly vague and blind route. In the daylight, perhaps it might have been well; but in the dark, the masses of tangled bushes utterly confused him.

At times he was compelled to come to an abrupt halt, being entangled in the thorny bushes.

All the while the boy struggled and moaned, and tried to throw himself to the ground.

At last he came to a sudden halt.

"This won't do. I seem to be galloping in a circle, like a horse rider in a circus. Be still, boy; I don't mean to hurt you. You are going to be made a gentleman, and have a horse to ride of your own. Be quiet, your struggles pain and hurt you, not me; and

they will never make me release you—no never, never, do that."

A low moan responded to his words, and then the boy became motionless.

Jack put his spurs to his horse and galloped over the open part of the fields.

He had scarcely covered a mile of ground when he uttered a cry:

"The devil! yonder is Fox Hollow, close to old Burdell's cottage."

Once more the horse's head was turned; and again urging the beast to a gallop, Jack ejaculated: "I'll take the road at all hazards." He swept over the brow of the hill, and down into a hollow, and before he could pull in his horse, he found himself in the heart of a gipsy encampment. Fires were lighted; and though the hour was late, men were seated around the blazing wood, smoking pipes, and engaged in conversation.

The unexpected appearance of the horse and rider clattering in amongst them, occasioned a roar of surprise, and every member of the fraternity sprang to his feet.

Jack saw his dilemma at a glance, and his only chance of escape. He dived his hand into his breast pocket, and drew out a pistol, while he plunged his spurs into the already bleeding sides of his willing horse.

The poor beast snorted, and gave a mad start forward; the pain, again and again inflicted, infuriated him, and he increased his speed to a frantic pace.

One huge fellow made a mad leap at the bridle, but Jack fired at him, and he passed behind like a fleeting shadow. Away over the hill, and down again into a hollow, followed by a string of savage, reckless men

like a pack of wolves laid on to the scent of human blood.

Down into the gorge, the ground studded with decaying stumps of shattered trees. Jack heard the yell of exultation which burst from his pursuers as his maddened horse dashed down into this fatal gully, and almost the next instant he experienced a tremendous crash.

Some men of powerful mental capacities, or what may be better termed brute energy, will endure, without losing their senses, a collision which would strike others dead. This was the case with Jack Duke. His horse had fallen and flung him with tremendous force; but though terribly shaken and stunned, he was yet keenly sensible of the danger of his position.

He had saved the boy from injury when thrown, he knew that, and by a violent exertion he drew himself to his feet, abandoned his struggling, plunging horse, which he was sure was of no further use to him in his present position, and flinging the boy over his shoulder, forced his way among the bushes, with desperate strength, and gained the opposite rise only to find it, though of no great height, almost as perpendicular as a wall.

The shouts of the men were in his rear, right and left; but with his burden impossible to surmount the obstacle, he was at bay.

He stood firm to face his foe; drawing his second pistol and attempting to reload the one discharged. He was too late.

Crashing over the stunted bushes, leaping and yelling, poured the men. Some seized the horse and assisted him to rise, while others rushed up to surround Jack.

As they closed upon him, he shouted in a voice of thunder:

"Stand back! I'll blow out the brains of the first man that attempts to lay a finger upon me."

"You tried that on one just now," roared a tall fellow, making his way through his companions and confronting Jack; "and you went near enough to scoop a bit out of my cheek-bone."

"I'll not miss you this time," said Jack, fiercely. "Keep back, or the bullet at your first step will crash through your skull. Back! or I pull the trigger. I have no wish in any way to injure any one of you, and if you will assist me out of this place, and put me on the way to the depot so that I can get back to New York, I will, when I can communicate with my friend Jesse Lings, reward you for the service you may do me."

"Oh, your friend Jesse Lings!" ejaculated the tall fellow, whose cheek was bleeding freely.

"Oh, we don't want to hurt you if you don't want to hurt us," said another fellow, sidling up.

At the same moment, with the rapidity of lightning, he, with a strong ash stick, struck up Jack's pistol.

The tall gipsy, observing his companion's intention, flung himself upon Jack, and seized him around the body; two others quickly pinioned him round the arms. One produced from his pocket some thin strong cord, and with the quickness of thought, Jack was bound hand and foot, a helpless prisoner.

He was lifted up by several of the men, and conveyed to the encampment.

The boy in the blanket was also conveyed there, while one or two brought up the rear with the cob.

When the encampment was reached the wood em-

bers were stirred up into a blaze, and the blanket was removed from what was supposed to be the stolen body of a lamb or a pig. A shout of surprise followed the discovery of the motionless boy.

"I'll be blowed if it ain't a little dead boy!" cried one of the men.

"No, no—not dead," roared Jack; "dash some water in his face; he has fainted."

"Hi! hi! Zulie!" shouted the tall gipsy.

Almost immediately from one of the huts a half-dressed woman crept, and in a few words the tall man told her the condition of the boy.

She hurried to him, and from her pocket she produced a small bottle, containing a dark liquid. Some of this she poured into the palms of her hands, and rubbing them together, applied her damp hands to the boy's temples and to his nostrils.

In a short time the boy's head rolled from side to side, then his eyes opened, and he gazed about him wildly, looking with alarm upon the swarthy faces and dark fierce eyes bent upon him. With a cry of terror he hid his face, and burst into tears.

"Stand back all of you!" exclaimed the old woman; "you frighten him."

With a laugh the men stepped back to indulge themselves with a stare at Jack.

The woman bent over the boy, and whispered in his ear:

"Don't be afraid, Chuck, it's me. Don't you know me? it's Zulie, talking to my sweet Chuck! You ain't afraid of Zulie, no?"

The boy removed his hands from his eyes. "Is it really you, Zulie?"

"To be sure it is, my boy," she replied, in a tender

tone; "look in my face; there—ain't it you Zulie, Chuck."

"Oh, yes! oh, yes! I'm so glad. Oh, dear good Zulie, take me home, take me home—do take me home."

"That I will, my herb o' grace," she answered in soothing tones. "Nobody shall hurt a hair o' your head. If he tries it he will taste the virtue of a knife between his ribs; they know Zulie—they know Zulie don't make them promises 'cause she's fond of joking."

A young girl now joined her, and the old woman said to her:

"Take him up in your arms, Gatha, while I goes and speaks to Swift; take care on him. Zulie will be back again, Chuck," she concluded, as the girl wrapped him in the horse-blanket, taking him up in her arms.

The old woman approached the tall gipsy as he was engaged applying the juice of some plant to his bleeding cheek. She caught him by the arm, and standing on tip-toe, whispered in his ear:

"Don't you know who the boy is?"

"No!"

"The child Harold Burdell," she returned.

"The child Harold Burdell!" he echoed. "Stuff, it 'tain't."

"I tell you it's the pet bird himself. Who ought to know him if I don't?" cried the woman.

The big fellow uttered an exclamation, and stalked toward Jack Duke, followed by Zulie.

Jack had strangely altered the looks of his face. He had roughed up his hair, muddled his features, twisted out his mustache, and so far as he could, altered his beard, while he lowered his eye-brows almost

to his cheek bones and puckered up the corners of his mouth.

The gipsy regarded him with earnest and close scrutiny for more than a minute.

Then he said, abruptly, "What was you going to do with that boy?"

"What is that to you?" asked Jack, gruffly.

"Why, a good deal. If I thought you intended him any hurt, I'd stake you to a ring and make my hound Grip bite you till there warn't a rag o' flesh on you."

Jack preserved a grim silence.

"Tell me what you was going to do with him, or I'll beat your skull in with a club."

"I don't care for what you do," answered Jack, in the same growling tone. "Give me my arms and legs free, and I'd show you such a back fall as you never saw before and would not wish to see again."

"What was you going to do with the boy?" exclaimed Zulie, sharply.

There was mischief in her tone.

"I was not going to hurt him," he said; "in fact, all the other way. I was going to take him where he has a right to be—to a noble mansion—not a wretched hut—where he would dress finely and not wear threadbare clothes as he does now, where all that gold could lavish upon him would be his, and where everything would be done to make him as happy as the day is long. Jesse Lings knows what I was going to do with him."

"Jesse Lings!" echoed the woman, with the same surprise as Swift Lane had exhibited.

"How much of this is bounce?" asked Swift.

"Just as much as there is in your courage."

"How did you get the boy in your hands?"

"Ask Jim Hanks."

Both Swift and Zulie showed their surprise.

"Ho! ho! you are the man who's been staying at Jesse Lings, last night and to-day!"

"What of that?"

"I think you'll know soon enough," was the reply, as Swift swung round to address his companions.

"Wait!" cried Jack to him in earnest tones. "One word with you first!"

"Well, what have you got to say?"

"It is very clear that some miserable mistake about me is afloat, and in consequence of which I have been, and am likely to get into a great deal of trouble. First of all, Mrs. Lings mistook me for a man who shot her brother."

Swift fastened a glittering, searching eye upon him.

"Well no," he muttered, "you warn't that man."

"No, I am not, Mrs. Lings knows that now."

"Does she?" exclaimed Zulie, with emphasis.

"Ask her."

"I will," said the woman.

"Next, I'm supposed to be a thief-taker, or spy, or something like that."

"Well!" growled Swift.

"Jes Lings can answer for me."

"Can he?" said Swift, suddenly. "Well, then he shall."

"As soon as you like."

"Now's a good time; nothing like the present time," responded Swift. "We will go to him now—we shall be sure to find him."

"I am ready," exclaimed Jack; "release my arms and legs, and I'll go with you with pleasure."

"Your legs, perhaps," said Swift; "but your arms is very well as they is."

The cords were removed from Jack's legs, and he was lifted to his feet. Swift, attended by half a dozen men and Zulie, who had given some instructions to the girl respecting the boy, led the way.

Over the fields they took their way, making direct for Jesse Lings', which in time they reached. Swift led the way into a back room, and all entered it, Swift carefully fastening the door.

Then followed a suspicious whispering between Swift and Zulie. At length Swift left the room, and was absent, to Jack, a most irksome time; Zulie uttered not a word, but sat with her eyes fixed upon him.

Presently the door opened, and Swift and Jesse Lings entered together and the door was closed again.

"Now," said Swift, sternly, "you told me, and you are ready to swear to it, that you are not the man who shot Jed Lane, and then caused him to be hung."

Jack Duke felt a cold thrill vibrate through him.

"You yourself said you knew me not to be the man."

"Good," said Swift. "You said Jes Lings would answer for you being no thief-taker."

"Oh, I'll answer for that!" exclaimed Jes Lings, readily, but with a grim, sinister expression on his countenance.

"Good!" ejaculated Swift. Again addressing Jack, he said: "You told me Jim Hanks could tell me how the boy Harold got into your hands."

"So he can, for I gave him five hundred dollars to do it. I don't know how he got him; he brought him to me, and I handed over the money to him."

"Bring in Jim Hanks," exclaimed Swift, to one of the men.

The man nodded, left the room, and the next minute entered, accompanied by the grisly gipsy.

The statement of Jack Duke was repeated to him.

"It's all a lie!" he cried, with a rough laugh.

"He was showing money to-night," said Jesse Lings, without relaxing his grim features; "and he said, he'd enough about him to buy out a good many of us."

"Search him!" said Swift.

Hanks struck out right and left, and felled to the ground two of the gipsies nearest to him; then rushed out of the door, and dashed out of the house.

"Go after him Hep—track him; he's got the money," roared Swift.

One of the men who had been struck by Hanks quitted the room, evincing considerable satisfaction at the instructions to pursue the fellow who had dealt him so severe a blow.

"I've proved all I have told you," said Jack, as the door closed, "I hope you are satisfied now."

Swift turned to Jesse Lings.

"Where's Nan?" said he.

"Here!"

He swung around quickly and faced his sister.

"Do you see that man?" he asked, pointing to Jack Duke.

She fixed her eyes upon him with a clear steady glance. Jack looked into her eyes with an expression of intense anxiety, but she showed no sign that she interpreted it.

"Do you know him?" asked Swift.

"I do," she replied.

"Enough!" he ejaculated.

Then he turned to Jack Duke, and pointed to Nan.

"You told me that she believed you to be the murderer of her brother?"

"I did," replied Jack.

"He spoke the truth," exclaimed Nan.

Swift scowled upon her.

"By what name do you call yourself?"

"Jack Duke," answered Jack, loudly.

"Liar!" he shouted. "You are Oscar Ross."

A growl burst from the lips of Jesse Lings, and a shrill yell from old Zulie.

Jesse Lings drew out a knife, and sprang at him with uplifted arm; but his wrist was caught, and he was flung aside, falling with a crash at the feet of Swift.

Nan had thrust him off. She stood before Jack Duke; her eyes shone like stars.

"It shall not be done!" she said, with compressed lips.

Jesse sprang to his feet, raging like a hyena; and would again have dashed both at his wife and the man she protected, had not Swift seized him, and held him with a firm grip. He foamed at the mouth and struggled violently.

"Let him come," said Nan, as she held up a long Spanish stiletto. "I knew him to be passionate before I married him, and I knew that in those freaks my life was worth little, unless I was well prepared to defend myself. Zulie gave me this; she will tell him that the point is poisoned. Let him come."

Jesse Lings stared at her. Could he believe his ears, his eyes? What! she stand up to defend that man!

"Fool!" he shrieked. "He is Oscar Ross—that same Oscar Ross who shot your brother—that same Oscar Ross who hunted him down, who never left him until he was hanged—hanged at Sing Sing!" he yelled.

"Stand out of the way, Nan," muttered Swift, hoarsely.

"No!" she cried, bringing up the knife to view. "I will not let a man be murdered upon supposition."

"He is Oscar Ross!" cried Zulie, with shrill vindictiveness.

"I say he is not! Speak, man, speak! and clear yourself."

"Oh, that my arms were at liberty!—I here declare my name to be Jack Duke, and no other. I never knew a Oscar Ross."

"There!" said Nan.

The others seemed staggered, and Jesse Lings, face had an indescribable expression.

"Hear me!" cried Nan. "Attempt to hang him, and I will have every man of this tribe hanged, to keep him company."

"You!" cried old Zulie, with glowing eyes.

"Yes, I will," said Nan, fastening her flashing eyes upon her.

"Nan may be right after all," said Jesse.

"No, she's not," said Swift and old Zulie.

"I say she may; it may be a case of mistaken identity! I say we had better talk it over; come into the parlor, and leave him here—he'll be safe enough."

One man was left in the room to guard him, and when all had departed, including Nan, who turned no glance toward him as she left, he sat in gloomy thought. His thoughts had hardly shaped themselves, when he saw the room door open quickly; Nan slipped in like a dart, and touched the man on guard, sitting near the door watching Jack, on the shoulder.

"Quick, quick," she cried, in low tones. "The man has tracked Jim Hanks; he has gone for the giant oak.

Swift says you shall have a share of what's on him if you catch him. Away out with you, man, quick, quick."

"All right, Nan," cried the fellow; and out of the room, and out of the house he fled like a deer.

Nan ran up to Jack. From beneath her apron she produced a large carving knife; with one gash of it, Jack was at liberty. She opened the window. "Out of here into the stable yard. There is a low wall at the back—over that—and into the country! Away for your life—for your life!"

"But I will see you again, though I risk my life a thousand times, Nan!" he exclaimed.

"You shall! I will see you in New York, some time to come," she said, hurriedly.

"New York—say the jungles of India. Write me a note, address it Jack Duke, General Postoffice, New York; I will be sure to get it."

"I will, I will remember; but go—for your life's sake, go!"

"My life is yours, Nan." He pressed her suddenly to his breast, then leaped on to the edge of the window sill and thence into the yard.

The window was closed behind him instantly. He pushed through the stable yard, found the low wall, vaulted over it, and was quickly into the open country beyond.

He pushed on at a rapid pace, and did not pause until he had reached some distance; then he turned to look to see how far he had left the house behind him. In the distance he saw a man running, making toward him.

"Followed, by Jove," he cried. "Here goes."

He sprang off at full speed, and kept it up, for he knew that the issue of the race would be life or death.

CHAPTER XIII.

WILTON GRANGER, immediately the ceremony of introduction ceased, begged the next dance with Grace. Roderick D'Olier instantly engaged the evidently not reluctant Dottie Burdell, and with a little impetuosity contrived to be in the same set with Wilton Granger and Grace.

Grace at once found herself the object of close attention to Roderick and to Dottie, while she was painfully sensible that Wilton Granger was, with a critical eye, scrutinizing every feature in her face.

Grace seemed unable to control her own eyes and prevent them settling upon the face of him who stood at her side. That face which she had seen but once before, she had never forgotten, and never should.

It was indescribably handsome—to her an almost terrifying beauty. It was a face which possessed amazing powers of fascination—not those which create reverence, esteem, affection, but rather those which raised emotion in which passion predominates and virtue takes no part; it was the fascination of the snake—luring, attracting, drawing close, but only for destruction.

Grace was at once conscious of its true nature, and while she instantly resolved to keep herself without the circle of its influence, she thought of Ora D'Olier.

"This man," she mused, "will, if he has not, win her heart for pastime, and then, as a child wearied with its toy, destroy it from mere sport. Will she be warned? Alas! drive a moth from a candle, and it returns to plunge madly into the flames."

"Are you fond of indulging in fits of abstraction, Miss Montrose?" exclaimed a low, bell-toned voice in her ear.

She started. It was Wilton Granger who spoke.

"I have been accustomed to solitude," she replied, in a quiet tone. "Relying upon self-resources for amusement, and denied the outward manifestation of satisfaction or pleasure, a species of reverie has been engendered, which hitherto I have much enjoyed; but I suppose as I mix more in society, I must abandon even this small pleasure."

"After all, Miss Montrose. If we are to select this," (he pointed around him) "as the world in which we elect to revolve, let us conform to its conventionalities, and in the name of goodness forget those we learned at home in the nursery, at school, or out of those good books which taught us propriety in two syllables!"

"I have not much adaptability, I fear," replied Grace coldly.

The dance has commenced, and Grace went through her first quadrille with a wildly beating heart, but a self-possession which enabled her perfectly to remember what she had been taught, and performed the part assigned her with graceful ease.

"Have you any faith in presentiments, Miss Montrose?" exclaimed Wilton Granger suddenly, so suddenly that Grace was startled. It was a subject which at the moment had possession of her mind; she hardly knew what to reply at first.

"Presentiments take many forms; to what class do you allude?"

"I speak of that presentiment which rises up like a spectral shadow in heart and brain; when in society we at a moment encounter one until then a stranger, to

whom it points and says. 'There is one with whose destiny yours is woven.' Do you understand me now?"

"I may better probably when I am subjected to so remarkable a visitation."

"Miss Montrose, I seem to hear a loud-toned voice sounding in my ear and vibrating through my brain, telling me that our destinies are interwoven——"

"I see Mr. Milroy Falcon has joined our friends," exclaimed Grace, coldly, with an assumed air of having paid no attention to the last observation made by Wilton Granger. "Pardon me, I will return to them, now the dance is ended."

He bit his lip, and his brows contracted as he conducted her to where Mildred Dupont, Milroy Falcon, Mrs. Burdell and Dottie were grouped together.

Mildred darted a sharp glance at Wilton Granger's face, and again at Grace's, and then, with a satisfied expression, she turned to watch Mrs. Burdell and Milroy Falcon, who were in conversation with each other. Roderick soon joined the party, and it was during a burst of merriment that a shadow interposed. It glided like a spectre in their midst, and a dead silence ensued.

It was Whitney Falcon Burdell.

He glared round him, and said sternly: "Mrs. Burdell, Miss Burdell, your carriage is waiting for you."

With constrained and angered dignity, he offered to each an arm, and then he bent his frowning eyes on Milroy Falcon, who met his gaze with a calm look of scorn.

"I insist, Milroy Falcon, that this is a mean attempt to reunite the divided branches of our race, by endeavoring surreptitiously to make acquaintance with those members of my family, who know nothing of the causes

which have separated us, or which is of far more importance—your antecedents."

Milroy Falcon started, yet he controlled himself.

"With your object," continued Whitney Burdell, "I cannot be in doubt; but be assured by me that it will never succeed, and every attempt to effect it will be ignominiously defeated."

"My object!" muttered Milroy Falcon, with an air of surprise.

"Oh, sir, it may suit you to affect ignorance, but your efforts at deception, or any of your arts, affect me only in one way—you can guess what that is without fatiguing me to give the explanation."

"Whitney Burdell, I do not envy you the sense you must at this moment feel of the contemptible part you are acting. From our boyhood you have indulged an enmity to which I have added nothing, but would far rather have smoothed away. Ever and always you have been the aggressor. I have treated your proceedings with indifference; now I view them with scorn. Henceforth, beware! I submit no longer to aggression without retaliation; I accept the enmity as you offer it. Do your worst, Whitney Burdell, I defy even as I despise you."

Milroy Falcon waved his hand with scornful disdain, bowed low and respectfully to Mrs. Burdell and Dottie, and walked away.

The veins in the forehead of Whitney Burdell swelled like cords. With a smothered exclamation of rage and hate he strode from the room, dragging rather than conducting his wife and daughter with him.

Mildred Dupont looked to the last upon Mrs. Burdell; who as she left the ballroom turned her head, and gave a hurried glance behind her. Mildred smiled.

"The proof," she muttered; and added, "it is sealed."

She turned to her friends who were yet silent, and whose faces exhibited traces of great surprise, and said:

"Whitney Burdell is fond of scenes; he would have made one here, but that Milroy would not humor him."

"He is a disgraceful creature," observed Ora. "It is painful to be at their house when he is in town; he snubs Dottie, and frowns without speaking to his wife."

"I fancy," said Wilton Granger, "that Mrs. Burdell is a match for him there; she is a marble rock—a very glacier."

"Outwardly," responded Mildred; "but you have heard the trite figure of the snow-capped mountain, beneath which rages a volcano."

"I believe in the metaphor most devoutly," returned Wilton, with an earnest gaze full in the eyes of Grace. "But certainly her marriage was one of convenience; she wished for position, and she took the man for it. Oh! she could never love in her life."

"Never," said Mildred, "until—she——"

"Until when?" asked Wilton.

"Until she meets with him who unites those qualifications with which she has adorned her ideal," was the emphatic reply. "When she loves, it will be an adoration for which she will make any sacrifice or dare any danger."

"A noble passion!" cried Wilton, again regarding Grace with earnest eyes. "Give me love of that woman who sees, in the world, alone the object of her choice; the love which faints at no difficulty to gain happiness for the loved; which pauses at no sacrifice to testity its affection; whose impulses are raised by

her love for him, and for him alone; which sees a beauty in his daily life that no human weakness or infirmities he may display can weaken or diminish——"

"How preposterously absurd," laughed Roderick.

"What do you say, Miss Montrose?" asked Wilton.

Her lips curled. "Yet not impossible," she said.

Mildred with fine tact changed the conversation, and neither Grace or Ora cared to dance again.

That night when they had reached their home, Mildred came into Grace's room to talk with her.

After discussing the evening's entertainment, they gradually approached the subject which embraced the meeting of Milroy and Whitney Burdell. Mildred spoke of it evasively, but Grace was too much interested in everything with which she considered herself connected to pass it over.

"Were Milroy and Mr. Burdell friends when they were boys?"

"Why do you put that question?" inquired Mildred, regarding her earnestly.

"For no other reason than that Milroy seemed to imply as much," she returned.

"Never friends—they were slightly acquainted in youth. But, let that pass; their early quarrels cannot interest or affect either you or I; but think of it, there are two favors I especially beseech you to grant to me."

"What are they?"

"Will you promise me your consent?" urged Mildred.

Grace smiled, and placed her hand in Mildred's.

"You know my foible, I think you call it," she said, "of not promising anything until I am able to perform it."

"You can perform both with ease. First you are ostensibly of the same line as Milroy Falcon, and Whitney Burdell's ban does not reach you. Now Mrs. Burdell expresses a sudden liking for you. I most strongly desire you to cultivate her friendship. Do not ask me why. I can only answer that I am most anxious to achieve this object. Will you, Grace dear, oblige me in doing this?"

"In a degree it is awkward," answered Grace; "but if there is no difficulty in meeting with her again——"

"None whatever."

"Then I can see no reason for refusing you."

"Your consent?"

"I do, and with pleasure, for I too, conceived a predilection for Mrs. Burdell as soon as I beheld her."

"So far well," exclaimed Mildred with a pleased smile; adding, "my other request promises not to be so easily granted."

"I will be as compliant as I can, for I have much to be grateful to you for."

"Never speak of that. To my favor. It is that you exert yourself by such winning arts and wiles as women gifted with beauty—humble compared to yours—employ when they seek to enthral the affections of man, to win the love of—" she paused.

Grace looked at her with astonishment.

"Of whom?" she asked.

"You cannot dream of its importance," exclaimed Mildred.

"Of whom?" repeated Grace.

"Wilton Granger!" cried Mildred, in a tone that electrified Grace.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE morning after Jack Duke's escape from Jesse Lings' house found him in his new quarters in the city, far removed from Hook Flint's unsavory den. He had taken a bath and robed himself in his best. When all ready he surveyed himself in the glass.

"Not much like Jack Duke in this style," he exclaimed with satisfaction; and added, "how those bright black eyes would glitter and flash to see me now, and hear tender words from my lips. Nan, we must meet again, and you shall see me thus."

Leaving some directions with his landlady, Oscar Ross, Jack Duke, sallied forth once more as Major De Montrose.

He directed his steps toward Fifth Avenue, and sauntered toward the Burdell mansion, having no specific object in doing so. As he slowly walked on, a handsome carriage passed with two ladies in it. In an instant he recognized Mildred Dupont and Grace.

"Grace, by Jove," he ejaculated; "how changed, what a beauty she is! What an ass I must be not to have discovered that before! Oh! if I had known—no matter, it is not too late, wait until I catch her alone. She is a fine dressed lady now, but still in my power."

While yet looking after them, unconscious of the look of horror and aversion with which Grace had recognized him, a carriage dashed past him; he saw in it Mrs. Burdell and Dottie.

The eyes of the proud lady and his met. It was a strange expression of threat and defiance which passed between them.

Nevertheless he raised his hat, and bowed low.

At the same moment a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and he beheld the sallow, shaggy-haired face and bloodshot eyes of Jim Hanks close to him.

There in the broad sunlight, surrounded by fashionables, stood confronting him the ragged, travel-stained gipsy, in the vile costume of a horse thief, addressing him too in loud tones of familiarity.

This apparition, still keeping one hand firmly upon Oscar Ross's shoulder, seized his delicate-hued gloved hand with the other, with a warm ardor which promised to weld the four knuckles into one.

Only that very morning while thinking with vindictive though half-formed purpose respecting Swift Lane, he endeavored to suggest to himself a plan by which he could fall in with Hanks, and lo! there stood the man.

But he must not be seen in such company; so thrusting a card and some money in Hanks' hand, be told him to come to his rooms that night, and then swiftly made his way down a side street, and never slackened the rapidity of his walk until he found himself inside of his own private room door, where he found Mildred Dupont awaiting him.

He looked with utter surprise at her.

"You are surprised!" she exclaimed.

"Well, slightly, I thought you had continued your drive up the ave—" said he.

"I understood that you gave me a sign, and so left the carriage and hastened here."

"Well, no, not exactly," was the reply.

Just then a ring at the street door made him start, and before he had a chance to speak, the room door was suddenly opened.

He was electrified at beholding the grimy face and shaggy locks of Jim Hanks protruding through the door.

He looked aghast as the ruffian quickly and abruptly entered, closed the door, placed his back against it, and folding his arms, regarded him with a defiant air.

"Leave the room!" thundered Ross, as he advanced toward the gipsy.

"Keep off!" cried Hanks. "I know what you can do, you know; and I don't want to try another fall with you. I want to talk quietly and gentleman-like with you."

"I neither know nor desire to speak to you," roared Ross, who was far more afraid of Hanks' tongue than his fists; he was afraid Mildred would hear the very thing he was so desirous to keep secret from her till the right time came, and then she would bid high for the secret.

"Go out of this room or I will fling you down the stairs!"

"You do know me," returned Hanks; "I'm Jim Hanks, you know; I got you the child——"

Ross sprang upon him, seized him by the throat, swung him around, and dragged him to the door, which opened on the instant, and introduced Hook Flint, in the garb, and with all the peculiarity of appearance which pertains to the director of a wealthy public company, a banker, a stockbroker—any business in which the transactions are of a specially wealthy nature.

His entrance caused a pause in the struggle. Ross was as loth that Hook Flint should know aught of the transaction in which he and the gipsy he held in his grasp had been engaged, as he was for Mildred to learn it; but he felt himself at once to be the victim of cir-

cumstances, and the best thing he could do would be to swim with the stream and strive no longer against the adverse form they were evidently assuming.

"What is all this?" exclaimed Hook Flint, taking in at a comprehensive glance the whole situation; "struggling, fighting, before a lady who appears to be frightened out of her wits at your behavior! Oh, bad, very bad; very bad, indeed."

"This man is an intruder here," exclaimed Ross, between his teeth. "He refuses to leave this room, into which he has most unwarrantably forced himself, and I am about to try the force of physical persuasion."

Hanks licked his black and parched lips and then said, huskily:

"What I wants is this——"

"You must go," cried Ross, with a growl.

"Take your hand away, my friend," exclaimed Hook, laying his hand upon the arm of Ross; "I know that man."

"You!" responded Ross, with surprise.

"Aye—his name is Hanks," continued Hook; "he is a member of the horse dealing fraternity."

"Horse stealing," thought Ross.

"He is harmless in his intentions—a little odd in his manner, but very tractable and good-natured, if you know how to deal with him. Release him, my friend; I will take him with me. He will come with me."

"Will he?" growled the gipsy, as Ross removed his hands from him.

Hook sidled up to him, and whispered two words in his ear. The effect was magical. Hanks turned his black eyes upon him and said:

"What! is it you, sir? All right—I'll go with you—anywhere you like." Then he turned to Ross, and

said, "Good-day, Mr. Mustarch; you'll be sorry for this, you know. You'll want me to go stealing for you again, won't you; you'll catch me doing it—you will."

So saying he turned to follow Hook out of the room.

Ross went slowly after him. As they descended the stairs the eyes of Hanks turned mechanically on Ross, and with no little surprise he saw him place his finger on his lips, and point to Hook, who was in advance, and extend the fingers of both hands perpendicularly, while he whispered hastily—"To-night."

Hanks, very shrewd and extremely sharp, understood the motions, and nodded.

"So it's all right, after all," he thought; "only I've come at the wrong time."

He went on after Hook, and Ross returned into the room.

"I am afraid you have been alarmed," he exclaimed, when he saw Mildred sitting with a placid aspect.

She replied in the negative, but she believed that she had been enlightened so far as to feel sure that there was some dealings between Hanks and Ross, which the latter disowned only in her presence; and therefore it was important that she should know what they were.

She did not seek to ascertain by putting a question respecting it; she only said:

"Professions are cheap, and to me valueless. I make no imputations, I simply give you a serious warning to be true to my service. You do not know the consequence which will follow and proved double-dealing on your part; I do. I therefore caution you. Farewell."

He took her extended hand, and would have raised

it to his lips, but she snatched it away. He would have attended her to the street, but she forbade him, saying, "Remain where you are; as I came, so will I depart—alone."

She left the room, closing the door, and Ross flung himself into a chair.

He wiped the perspiration from his face.

"What an infernal dilemma to be placed in!" he muttered. "What a jackass that fellow Hanks must be! He understood me at last, though; and if he does not wag his tongue too freely with Hook Flint, I may be master of the situation yet. But then my Hook has such a way; he is such a cunning, artful insinuating infant, he'd wheedle a beef-bone from a hungry tiger's claw, he—what! Hook so soon back!" he exclaimed, starting up as he suddenly became conscious of the presence of the "insinuating infant" in the room; and further, that he was attentively regarding the workings of his features.

"Soon back," repeated Hook, iterating Ross's words. "Nothing stylish in Jim Hanks' exterior. To be seen with such a companion is not to impress people with a notion that you are select in your acquaintance, or with a belief that you are not one of the flock in different clothing."

"Intelligent offspring! You tamed the brute with admirable ease. What had he to say for himself?"

"Well, he had no reserve," answered Hook.

"No reserve!" repeated Ross, disconcerted. Then he laughed. "Perhaps," he said, "it would have been better if he had. Anything a fellow would say, in the first place you could not believe; in the second, it would be of a character you would not be overjoyed to listen to."

"It was about you."

"About me?"

"He was lamenting that little affair did not come off as you designed it."

"Oh—the little affair?"

"Yes; clever trick of yours to disown the man before the lady. She is of course——"

Hook made a peculiar gesture.

Ross nodded assent.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Hook. "It would never have done to let her know, would it—eh?"

Ross was puzzled. He wondered how much Hook really did know of the truth.

"Don't like Jesse Lings, I hear?" continued Hook, peering at Ross beneath his brows.

"Jesse Lings?"

"Oh yes; I know—can't deceive me. You have been down to pay a visit about the boy—you know. Ho, ho! It won't pay you, Oscar Ross, to play tricks with me: I am your colleague—your partner in this little affair."

"Curse the little affair!" roared Ross, in a rage. "What do you mean by little affair? Speak out, and in plain language. Tell me fairly and openly if you have any charge to make, and make it. I will reply to it as I think proper, pay you for what service you have done, and discharge you—don't you understand—discharge you——"

"You are a bold rogue, Oscar Ross, and I like you the better for it," Hook said, in a tone which did not harmonize with the words. "Take your own way; I can't quarrel with you; I am your humble servant."

The pear was not ripe enough for Hook yet.

Ross looked at him with scrutinizing eyes, and said, sharply:

"What had Hanks to tell you?"

"Never mind now; let it go. I was upset at first—but there—say no more about it."

"He knows nothing yet," thought Oscar.

Then he said:

"Let me remind you of a piece of indiscretion on your part, my friend. You have several times called me Oscar Ross. I am Major De Montrose. I must be known to everybody by that name."

"I have only used your name in speaking to you," exclaimed Hook, quickly.

"Yes, but there may be eavesdroppers; how do I know but you styled me Oscar Ross to that fellow, Hanks?"

"Never—no," responded Hook, quickly; "you know me better than that. Hanks talked—I listened."

"All is right so far then," thought Oscar.

Drawing out a cigar, and lighting it, he said, as he commenced to smoke:

"Now, Hook, my president of mimics, to what special piece of self-interest may I attribute the honor of your visit?"

"Well, I had to come uptown on business, and I had not seen nor heard anything of you for a week: I wished to know how things were progressing, and when I shall be required more actively to commence operations. I wish you had introduced me to that lady—beautiful creature, fine woman. What flashing eyes!"

"Flashing!"

"Well, my friend, reading, searching, close-examining eyes—eh!"

"Yes."

"Fortunate thing Fan did not drop in and see her here; the little fool would have been jealous."

Oscar nearly dropped his cigar. "Fan! What do you mean? Fan has never been here, and is not likely to come here, I imagine; if she did, what the devil has the presence of a lady here to do with her jealousy?"

"Bah! Oscar Ross——"

"Major De Montrose!"

"Well, Major—you must have observed the little idiot is taking a horrible fancy to you."

"To me! ridiculous! quite the contrary. When I first made my appearance for a letter, as you know, at your palace of industry, the moment I attempted to be civil to her, she dealt me a blow sufficient to fell an ox. Not much fondness in that, I conceive, O father of a vixen! as a Turk would say."

"Yes, but she used to attend on you, you know, and the fact is, Ross—a—Major, you were always a desperate lover of the fair sex; you can't help speaking to them as if you were making love, and young creatures are very credulous, and quickly believe what they wish to be true. When you dropped your dingy garments, and came forth a gentleman of leisure, poor fool! she goes sighing about, and does not know half the time what she is doing."

"On my account! You were never more mistaken, Hook. Please change the subject; you wrong her, and rather annoy me."

"I am right, nevertheless. My old woman has told me so, and she knows."

"Your old woman—who is she?"

"My right hand—Meg; clever creature—faithful—very useful."

"What! that grandmother of the Mohawks? Hook, what is your object in introducing this subject?"

"Reason? none. I mentioned it, merely to let you know that I am acquainted with the girl's foolish fancy, and conviction that you will never attempt to take advantage of it."

Hook uttered the last words with an emphasis of so peculiar a kind, and an expression so terribly murderous upon his cadaverous features, that Ross drew forth volumes of smoke from his cigar, and let it play about his own features, to hide the embarrassed, confused expression that he knew they wore.

"He has a design in this," thought he. "I would stake my life on Fan's preservation of her secret; I shall take refuge in the safest of all retreats—silence."

Hook Flint now cautiously let drop that he had seen Whitney Burdell since their joint visit to the mansion in Fifth Avenue, and explained that having given Mr. Burdell a card, upon which he had penciled an address in the event of his desiring to communicate with him, a letter had reached him, saying that he would like to confer with him upon a point which had been overlooked at their last interview, but was necessary to discuss before they met at the period already arranged. "I called here for you on my way there," he continued, with a gibing grin on his face; "but your highly respectable, though slightly talkative landlady informed me that you had been out 'some days' and she thought it probable that you would not return for 'some days.'"

"Bah! she is a fool. But Whitney Burdell, what did he want with you?"

"Oh, a mere piece of foolish repetition respecting the old man Burdell who has charge of the boy, and to add that he has some connection with a tribe of gipsies who roam over the country; that it would be of the greatest importance not to let any attempt to carry off the child come to their knowledge, as the certain death of the individual who obtained possession of him would be the result."

"Did he explain the nature of the connection between old Burdell and the gipsies?"

"He hinted that he knew; but as he did not offer to explain—and he is infernally proud—I thought it politic to ask nothing further about it. He urged an immediate attempt to get the boy; so I should say, if you can be ready next week——"

"Next week!"

"Yes—not before. It will be quite impossible for me to join you earlier—I have a most important matter to attend to—but next week I am your man."

He intended paying Jesse Lings a visit the next day, to try what he could do toward obtaining the possession of the boy. He was now quite aware of the value of the prize, and he quite intended to have sole possession of it if possible.

Oscar Ross had no desire to stir earlier in the matter. Much would depend upon his interview that night with Hanks, and he felt quite certain under existing circumstances no step would be advantageously taken unless with the counsel and assistance of the man Hanks. He therefore appeared reluctantly to acquiesce in the proposition made by Hook, though he informed him that she who employed them knew of the boy's existence—that he was of more value in her hands, and through her to them—than if they obtained him for

Mr. Whitney Falcon Burdell. It was their task to cajole him, and serve her, and she had been, he said, urging him on to effect the immediate possession of the child Harold.

"However," observed Ross, with an assumed tone, "I can do no good without you in it, so I must wait."

"Two heads are better than one—so you will find."

Ross seemed not to notice the allusion, but said:

"Was Mrs. Burdell visible when you were there?"

"No; I am thankful to say. She read your thoughts, and she seemed to turn over page after page of my every day book, when we dined there, so that I felt it quite a relief not to meet with her."

"I must see her, and alone," said Ross, with emphasis.

"That can be easily done," remarked Hook, with a grin.

"How?"

"Simply this. I suggested a call with you upon Mr. Burdell on Friday next, but he said no, not on that day, as himself and daughter would visit a relative in the country whom Mrs. Burdell did not meet, and therefore she would be alone at their house on Fifth Avenue that day."

"I will be there," said Ross, with decision.

"As I shall be engaged very closely for the next few days, I would much rather, unless anything requiring my co-operation calls for me, you do not communicate with me during my absence."

"Going far?" said Ross, carelessly.

"Only a few miles," observed Hook, thrown off his guard; "but you know, my friend, that it costs me some trouble to secure a bargain."

"He is going away on a particular enterprise,"

thought Ross. "I'll pay my tender little Fan a visit while he is away."

A few more words passed between them, and then Hook departed, secretly determining to have an interview with Mildred Dupont. He knew her address, he guessed shrewdly her character, and was quite conscious that he would have to play his cards with exceeding discretion; but he wished to be a principal in the great game he knew to be playing, and not a subordinate, and felt that he was far more fitted for the post that Oscar Ross now filled; and if artifice and cunning sagacity could obtain it, he would have it.

Oscar sat alone when he was gone, and forming a resolution to seek Fan once more, engaged himself in devising an excuse for visiting his friend's establishment the next day, or the day after, providing he found Hook at home when he called, when his ear caught a gentle tap at his door. There was something peculiar in the sound which caused him to rise and open it.

There stood Fan—Hook Flint's daughter.

CHAPTER XV.

THE morning after the ball, Wilton Granger's servant announced to him that his carriage was at the door; and after completing his toilet and displaying a slight hesitation in his choice of hat and gloves, he went out for a drive, intending to leave his card at the residence of Miss Montrose.

Among those who had fastened a matrimonially speculative eye upon him was Mr. Whitney Burdell; his daughter Dottie was at a marriageable age, and a

union between her and Wilton Granger, for many reasons would be singularly advantageous to him.

This aim was the secret of his ready acquiescence to the frequent appearance of Mrs. Burdell at numerous fashionable assemblies. Wilton was invited everywhere: Mrs. Burdell and Dottie were also invited and would scarcely fail to meet Wilton at many places. Whitney Burdell had faith in his daughter's personal attractions; and though he would not for all he might possibly gain in accomplishing the wished-for result have it thought that he lent himself to scheming for a husband for his daughter, still he shut his eyes to the known fact that it was dangerous for a girl at all impressionable to be thrown in contact with the heir to millions; and he dropped hints to his wife that he should approve of the friendship of Wilton Granger, with whom personally he was as yet not acquainted.

Mrs. Burdell detected through the flimsy covering his real purpose, and as much as possible kept Dottie out of Wilton's way; while Whitney Burdell prematurely confided to one or two intimates, who confided to others his expectation that Wilton would probably if he, Whitney Burdell, interposed no obstacle, become his son-in law.

Mrs. Burdell despised Wilton, and threw Dottie into the society of Roderick D'Olier. The result of this manœuvering was, that Dottie, as Mrs. Burdell wished, fell in love with Roderick D'Olier.

Wilton Granger halted, according to the programme he had arranged of his day's movements, at the door of the D'Olier's residence, and was ushered into a room where he found Ora alone.

"Roderick has gone out to pay a morning call, but he will be back soon, he told me as he went away."

"I have rather a special motive for seeing him. Will I be encroaching upon your amiability if I ask you to permit me to remain until his return?" he inquired, in his most captivating tone.

"I will be more pleased than otherwise, for I am in want of a companion, if it is only to keep my thoughts free."

He looked at her face keenly for an instant, and then said:

"When our thoughts are shackled, Miss Ora, it usually happens that our hearts are in bondage."

"It is not my case to-day, so if it pleases you we will change the subject. What do you think of Miss Montrose?"

He cast his eyes about the room, and then at the doorway. Bending near to her, he said in a low, exquisitely-modulated tone:

"Why do you not ask me, Ora, what I think of you?"

A faint tinge of color might have been perceptible upon her cheek, but she kept her eyes fixed upon the flowers in her hand, and answered:

"Perhaps I already know—possibly I do not care to know, Mr. Granger; at least it is no answer to my question, What do you think of Miss Montrose?"

He bit his lip; but without changing his manner he said:

"You are friends, I believe."

"Indeed, I heartily hope so," she replied.

"Then I will give you an answer in the highest degree favorable of her," he returned, with a sarcastic laugh.

"And compliment me in doing so. My brother's horse is at the door," exclaimed Ora, rising; "he will

join you in a minute or two. Let me thank you, Mr. Granger, for having beguiled what would have been otherwise a tedious half-hour."

"I am happy," he said, in a bitter tone, "in having had the opportunity, Miss D'Olier, of affording you some amusement."

She glided swiftly out of the room. He strode to the window. A red flush was on his face, and his eyes glittered with rage.

"What revolution of the wheel is this?" he muttered. "Hitherto events have turned out as I could wish them, bright and joyous as summer days. What clouds are these that threaten? Ora, you shall be mine; I will not spare you, though your heart breaks beneath your shame. I will make you the finger mark of scorn, an outcast from the hearts and the homes of those nearest and dearest to you. I will——"

A hand was laid upon his shoulder, and a pleasant voice said, laughingly:

"What, soliloquizing? What fair one is on the tenter hooks awaiting in agony your approbation or dismissal —eh?"

He started, as the guilty ever do, at the sudden touch of an unexpected hand, and turning saw at his side Roderick D'Olier. He seized his hand and shook it.

"My dear Roderick," he said, "I am glad to see you. I am anxious to have a little chat with you. Will you accompany me in a drive?"

"With pleasure, Wilton, with pleasure."

The two friends descended the stairs together, and passed through the hall door to where the carriage stood at the curb-stone.

The groom, a stunted young man, in unexceptionable livery, was standing at the head of the horse, holding

the champing noble animal by the bit. He touched his hat as Granger appeared, and then held toward him a note.

"What is this?" cried Granger, angrily.

"Don't know, sir. A man gave it to me, and said you must have it, as life and death depended on it."

Granger snatched it from him, and tore it open. The contents were written in a woman's hand. The characters, which were elegantly formed, were yet traced with a trembling hand. They ran thus:

"Wilton, meet me at the old place at three—for the last time, if you will; but you must come, or the consequences may be terrible—to you. For myself I neither fear nor care; but, in spite of all that has passed, I wish to save you from exposure, disgrace, perhaps worse. If you refuse to keep the appointment you will not only have to endure a result as fearful as inevitable, but your great and despairing unhappiness will be added to by the knowledge that you have brought the ruin on yourself. S. D."

When Granger perused this the first time he laughed; the second time he twisted his moustache thoughtfully. Then addressing the groom, he said:

"Who gave you this?"

"A man, sir."

"No matter," exclaimed Granger.

He gathered the reins firmly in his hands, and sprang into the carriage.

"Let go his head, Flack," he cried, as the high-mettled horse began to plunge.

"Spanker's very fresh this morning, sir," shouted the groom. The next instant the groom let go the horse's head, and made a flying leap at his one foot square monkey-board behind as the horse dashed off.

As they drove on Roderick tried several times to lead the conversation to Grace, but Wilton diverted it

to another topic, and, on the last mention of her name, he said, suddenly:

"Oh, by the way, Roderick, have I offended your amiable sister, Ora?"

"Offended her? No! assuredly not. Why do you ask?"

"Why—it might be fancy, it is true—but it struck me while in conversation with her this morning that there was a certain coldness——"

"Oh—ha! ha! I see—I see," cried Roderick, with a laugh. "Do you not comprehend?"

"Indeed, I do not."

"Why, man, it is simple enough. You were advancing to Ora last night at the ball to ask her to dance with you, when I interposed, and offered to introduce you to Miss Montrose. You asked that lady to become your partner for the dance—she accepted."

"Ah!" exclaimed Wilton. "I see it all now."

"Mine!" he mentally ejaculated, "hopelessly, helplessly mine!"

They had now reached the open country and Wilton commenced to slacken the speed of his horse, to which the animal submitted with a very ill grace. As they approached Yonkers the road began to ascend, and Wilton reined in his horse under a stone wall.

"I must get you to hold the reins for me, Roderick, for a few minutes," said he. "There is a small house near here, where I make a call, and——"

Two men suddenly leaped from behind a massive abutment of the old stone wall. One sprang to the horse's head, the other, a well-dressed gentleman, stepped up to the carriage, and in a loud and authoritative tone said, sternly:

"Mr. Wilton Granger! Dishonorable dastard——!"

"Ha! is it so?" shouted Granger, turning a livid white.

He made a tremendous lash at the horse's thin-skinned, arched, and shining neck, and a rapid succession of fierce and violent cuts with his whip at the man who clung to the bridle of the leaping horse, which started at the sudden and violent attack upon him. Wilton repeated his swift blows upon its head, and, impatient of all further check or control, it plunged madly, tore its bridle from the grip of him who had seized it, wheeled round, sprang forward, and dashed down the road.

Flack had been about to dismount when the horse fled at his wildest speed, and the extreme suddenness with which he did so caused the small groom to lose his footing; but as he still clung to the supporting loops of the carriage, he only swung out behind like a tassel in the wind.

For a mile and a half the road was clear. Beyond that, at a road-side house, there stood country wagons, carriages, carts, and at straggling distances on the road, human lives, trembling on the verge of destruction, came dashing up, phantom-like, and swept by.

Then there arose cries, shouting, shrieking, yells, running men and boys, horsemen following in chase, a terrific crash, a horse flying on alone, and then a gathering crowd round the shattered remains of a carriage.

CHAPTER XVI.

Oscar Ross was certainly surprised at beholding Fan standing there.

The poor girl's face instantly became a bright crimson, but as quickly faded to a death-like paleness, and she murmured faintly:

"Mr. Ross, do not be offended with me."

Oscar, with a hasty exclamation, drew her inside the room, closed the door, and turned the key in the lock.

Fan viewed his proceedings with a look of affright.

"Do not misjudge me," she said, clasping her hands.

"Indeed, I do not, my little angel." He led her to a seat, not altogether perfectly at his ease. "How did you contrive to find my address? I intended to have paid you a visit to-morrow or the next day, at your father's house, and then I should have told you my address."

"You promised you would write to the place we agreed on; but I went several times and there was no letter for me."

"I have been out of New York and could not or dare not write to you. I should either have come down to your house in the morning, or the next day."

"Do not come to the house unless father is at home, unless I send for you; then as you value your welfare, fail not to come, for it will be of the greatest importance to you."

"Indeed!" said he, regarding her with surprise; then lowering his voice almost to a whisper, directing a glance at the door: "Why?"

Fan suddenly rose up, and before he could stop her, she walked swiftly to the door, unlocked it, flung it wide open, and looked into the hall and down the stairs.

"Who do you fear?" asked Fan.

"The individual I am not desiring to see here now is your amiable parent. He has just left here; and

though I fear not ten thousand Hook Flints in reference to myself, I do fear one when your happiness is at stake."

"I saw him come and I saw him leave," said Fan, calmly. "But he will not come now. He hastened on in the direction the lady took. If I am capable of reading the expression of his features—and they are truthful when he thinks he is alone—then he has gone to seek an interview with the lady."

"The devil! He never would play me such a double game."

"He is already acting alone, that I know, with a view to supersede you, and gain the whole of whatever reward may be offered for success. There are two parties interested, as far as I can learn."

"You!"

"Even I, Oscar," she exclaimed, in earnest tones.

"What the devil can that be!" said Oscar, thoughtfully. "I am quite aware, from what he let drop to me, that he was engaged in some nefarious enterprise, but I did not believe that it bore any relation to me."

"It does; there is some boy who is heir to some great property, of which fact he and his friends are not cognizant; and whoever can obtain possession of the boy, to secrete him or to produce him, will hold in his grasp the key to a large sum in gold."

"How came you to know all this?"

"Ask me not, Oscar. I know all this, and more—not without extreme hazard. I have gained many of his secrets of late—not for myself, but for you. I know that I do it at the risk of my life; but if I can serve you, I do not mind the penalty of a death-blow."

"My own darling! I would rather be ruined outright or have the death-blow myself than you. Tell me,

dear, what you've discovered! What does the artful old rogue know, and what does he intend to do?"

"You shall know all at the fitting time, but you must leave the revelations entirely at my discretion. I came now to tell you in order that you may be prepared how to act, that to-morrow early, my father goes up somewhere in the country—I think I caught the name Lings—to try to obtain this boy. Should he be successful in getting the boy, he will be brought up and placed——"

She paused.

"Where?" inquired Oscar, as she continued silent.

"I came here to warn you only, and let you know that it is, and will be, in my power to serve you in the future, to assure you that I will do so; and all that I ask of you is to think of me sometimes kindly, to see me occasionally, and to believe always that I love you truthfully and sincerely; for I know, Oscar Ross, that we can never be more to each other than we are now."

"What we may be to each other in days to come, is in the hands of fate."

"Hark!" suddenly interrupted Ross. "There is a single ring at the street door. Who can it be? Hush!" Oscar suddenly lifted the window and looked out. He drew his head in very much frightened.

"Your father, Fan, by all that is unlucky and fatal. I felt that the suspicious beast would be back again. What's to be done? Here—hurry into this room; there is a door in there which opens on to the stairs. While we are talking, you can glide down the stairs, and slip out of the house. Be silent and speedy, for your life will depend on it."

"I know it," she answered; "he would never par-

don my presence here, and show me no mercy, none. Farewell, Oscar."

"Go! go!" cried Ross, as he almost pushed her into the room.

He closed the door behind her, darted to his chair, seized up a book; and as he beheld his room-door slowly and noiselessly open, he appeared to be profoundly occupied in reading.

"Aha! my keen Hook!" cried he, as the door revealed the figure of his cunning colleague. "Why are you back here? What do you want with me?"

"A word or two which had escaped me when here before," he said, and his eyes roamed round the room.

"Come in and shut the door then," said Oscar, rising and stretching himself. Then he added with a yawn, "Two minutes later, and I should have been out. If there is one person whose society I more readily weary of than any other, it is my own."

"You have not had much opportunity to-day of indulging in it," Hook exclaimed, still peering around the room.

Ross banged the room door loudly, and said in his ear:

"I have an inquisitive landlady, who is very fond of knowing all the private affairs of all in the house."

"Quite sure she is not in here?" exclaimed Hook, suddenly opening the door which Fan had just gone through, and sallying into the room.

A film spread over the eyes of Ross; he was seized with a sudden faintness, and grasped a chair for support. He expected to hear a sudden shout from Hook. His emotion was but momentary, and by a struggle he recovered his self-possession. He followed Hook into the room, and taking him by the ear, pulled him out of it, and forced him into the chair.

With a gasp of relief, he saw that Fan had got away or was securely hidden—he could not tell which; it was enough for him that she was not there.

"Hook, my very deep inquiring philosopher, I cannot permit you to pry into the secrets of my dwelling house. If my landlady had been there she would have had no right to be there; but the investigation would belong rightfully to me, and not to you. You want to know a little too much about me, I fancy, my—Hook!"

"I don't want to offend you," exclaimed Hook, rather obsequiously; and pushed his chair suddenly, so that he could see out of the window into the street.

"You expect, I presume," he said, after a moment's pause, "to see Hanks again?"

"I do, to-night."

"Well, I want to see him too," said Hook.

"Wait here long enough and you will see him," returned Ross coolly. "If you won't do that—you know where you left him—go to him."

"I'll go to him," responded Hook, as if with a sudden determination. "Good-night, friend Ross."

"Farewell, prince of plotters, until we meet again."

Ross sat down, and laughed with joy at his release from a complication of difficulties, although it was temporary. He was rejoiced at the departure of Mildred, overjoyed at the escape of Fan, and now the determination to seek Hanks which Hook had formed, proved an intense relief.

A few thoughts about Fan, some half-formed intentions respecting Grace, a sudden recollection of Nan Lings, about whom he made a note in his pocket-book, and he started out to seek Hanks too.

Of the two searchers for that interesting personage, he was alone successful; but he found that it would be

in vain in the man's state of intoxication to do any business with him. He contented himself with suggesting to Hanks that he should make as great change in his exterior as he possibly could, and then quite free from the influence of liquor, meet him at a place he named at the end of three days.

Ross next directed his steps down-town to the general postoffice, and inquired for any letters which might be there awaiting the arrival of Mr. Jack Duke. One was handed him. He hastened to a dark corner of the large building, and tore the letter open as he muttered: "It is from Nan!"

As he was about to examine its contents, it was suddenly snatched out of his hand.

With a furious gesture, he was about to fasten on the person guilty of this insolent rudeness, when he perceived the writer of the letter before him.

"Nan!" he cried, in thunder-stricken tones.

"Even Nan," she exclaimed. "I wish to speak to you, earnestly, and alone; but you must take me somewhere known only to yourself, for there is murder on my heels, and it is after you. Quick, man, if you would not be struck down with a knife where you stand!"

For an instant Ross was paralyzed. Then with a sudden thought he seized hold of her hand.

"This way, this way. I will conduct you where we can be alone, and where we are not likely to be tracked."

As he said this he hurried with her out of the postoffice, and crossed Park Row and down the byway toward the river front.

CHAPTER XVII.

HOOK FLINT had been anxious for a few words with Hanks, the night before he left New York for the neighborhood of Fox Hollow, in order to worm out of him—or if not, to wring from him—a piece of information calculated to be of service in the project he had formed; but even his cunning, and all the artifices he adopted, failed in obtaining for him the desired interview. He had, therefore, to depart without it.

He did not proceed upon his mission as Ross had done, for he had no inclination to pay a large sum for a piece of work he fancied he could accomplish himself; and it was his intention, if he could help it, to suffer no one to know that he had any mission at all except to buy goods which could only be sold to such men as he.

Jesse Lings learned from an indirect source that he was in his neighborhood long ere he had made his appearance before the door of his house; and not having the slightest supposition that he was bound on a visit to him specially, actually sent a message to him, urging him to come and see him, as he wanted to make a deal with him. Hook Flint assigned a variety of reasons why he should be excused from complying; but pretended to suffer himself to be persuaded, and he entered Jesse Lings' house.

No one could have supposed from his manner or his conversation that he had any covert design; but if Jesse Lings had been aware of the fact, and was bent on thwarting him, he could not have avoided it better.

He slept there that night. The next day he found Mrs. Lings in the parlor.

He and Lings had been engaged in the vaults below for some time haggling over some bargain, and when they had made their appearance, Jesse found his wife alone, and in her ordinary attire.

Jesse exhibited no surprise, but merely said:

"Got back, Nan?"

"Yes."

Hook peered at her under his eyebrows. She knew he was looking at her, but she appeared to take no heed of him. Jesse mentioned his name, and asked her if she didn't remember him. She replied briefly in the affirmative, and in a tone which threw Hook off his guard, for he interpreted it as displaying the utmost indifference to his existence.

She, after a few commonplace remarks, almost made him leap off his seat, by saying to Jesse in a careless tone:

"Have you heard any more of old Burdell?"

"Yes!" said Jesse.

Then a silence ensued.

Never did a cat watch a rat as Nan watched Hook. She saw his eyes shine, he sat uneasily in his chair.

"The same old people about these parts, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Jesse.

"No changes, eh? No fresh importations?"

"Had a new one here a little while back, but he didn't stay long."

"Ah! who was he?" inquired Hook.

"Oh, I don't expect you know'd him—but do you? a a man named Duke?"

"Duke, Duke! I've some recollection of one Jack Duke——"

"That's him!" exclaimed Lings, slapping his knee.

Nan remembered with rapidity that Jack Duke, as she believed him, spoke of his knowing this man. What if the man she loved after all should turn out to be the murderer of her brother! She watched for Hook's further communication with agonized anxiety.

"Now," said Jesse, "comes a knotty point I should like to establish. We had a man down here the other day who got himself into a awkward scrape by trying to steal away a little child."

"Steal away a little boy. Did he get off with him?"

"No; but he got very nearly off his own feet, with his neck under the bough of a tree. He called himself Duke, flashed plenty of money about, but there was parties as said he was no other than Oscar Ross. Now, that's what I want to know—and you too, for the matter o' that, gal, don't you?" said Jesse, to his wife.

If silence had cost her her life, she could not have spoken. She could only motion with her head.

Hook was struck by the gleam of her eye as it rested on him awaiting his answer. He in an instant detected that she had more than a common interest in his reply, and it formed a foundation, at least, for a suspicion that there was some understanding of perhaps secret character between her and his esteemed friend Ross.

He recollected that Ross had warned him not to let Hanks know his real name, and it seemed very probable that the injunction extended to others.

"I know a person named Duke, too; but I should decidedly say that he and Ross are two distinct men. One is a coarse, dissipated looking scamp; the other a man who dresses well, and has a moustache and beard."

"Yes, yes," exclaimed Nan, quickly.

"Well, I s'pose it's a mistake," said Jesse.

"To be sure," exclaimed Nan, with a gesture of contempt; "yet every fool among ye all called me obstinate and mad because I believed the man, and saved him from being murdered."

"Saved him!" said Lings quickly, his eyes lighting up like living coals.

"Saved him," she answered, coolly.

"So it was you who put him through the window, eh?" said Lings.

"And what if it was?" she said, looking him in the face.

"I think you're too much interested in that quarter," he replied. "You'd better watch it, or you may have to save yourself from murder."

She showed her bright white teeth in a scornful laugh.

"From you, Jesse?" she cried. "Never! I am quicker-eyed, and mark me, quicker-handed than you."

She rose up as she spoke, and stalked out of the room. Up into her bedroom she went, to look around her in loathing, to sob, to hate herself, the world—to long to be away from her home—to be anywhere in the wide, wide world so that she were with Jack.

"I can see it all! Ross hasn't been down here for nothing," thought Hook, with a gulp, and grated his teeth. "My Fan loves this man—oh, but I'll cure her!"

Lings sat staring after his wife with his mouth open; a fiendish glare was in his eyes; and he would have followed her, but that Hook, perceiving the devilish expression of his face, stopped him, and proposed that they should have some brandy together. Jesse agreed to this with avidity, and helped himself copiously.

As soon as Hook began to observe him loquacious he began quietly to underate his abilities, his skill, and his knowledge, or rather his cunning, until he worked Jesse up into a highly boastful condition, ready to back himself to perform anything, and to possess a greater amount of information on all points than any man within ten miles around.

"Bah!" said Hook, jeeringly; "you are like a great many people. You think you know a rare quantity, when you know nothing. Why, I asked you if you had all the same people here, and you said yes. Why, there's a man I know to have been living here many years on the quiet, and he's gone away."

"Who?" said Jesse, quickly.

"There!" said Hook. "I thought you knew."

"Do you?" asked Jesse.

"Of course I do—old Burdell," said Hook.

"Did you know him?"

"Ha! ha! you know a great deal, don't you?"

"I knew he'd gone," snapped Lings.

"You know where, of course?"

"I do," said Lings.

"You don't, I'll bet two dollars."

"Do you?" inquired Lings, quickly.

"Do I?" echoed Hook; "do you suppose I'd offer to bet if I didn't? I'll bet you five dollars you don't."

"All right; I do," cried Lings, thrown off his guard.

"Stake your money," exclaimed Hook.

Lings produced a five-dollar gold piece from a leather bag, and laid it down on one Hook had put down.

"Now then, out with it," said Hook.

"New York," cried Lings, with a laugh, and was about to snatch up the two gold pieces; but Hook, as quick as a shot, clapped his hand down on them.

"No you don't," he said; "we all know he's gone to New York. New York is a big place; but what part of New York? because if you don't tell me, my friend, I shall tell you, and rake up the two gold pieces, my cunning boy. Quick, or I put them into my pocket."

"No. 74 Commercial Street," cried Lings.

"Stop!" said Hook; "that's very near it, but not quite."

"I say that's the place; no other," said Lings. "I tell you that it is; I won the money!" he roared, and made a grab at the gold.

"Um! I didn't think you knew it. I've lost. I shan't bet with you any more."

Lings whipped up the money and rattled them in his hands.

"I know's nothing, I don't," he said. "Purty music! I know's nothing, I don't."

In the noisy uproarious mirth which Lings indulged in, the rustle of a dress and a retreating footstep were not heard; nor half an hour afterward, the departure of the shock-headed boy on his way to the village postoffice, with a note to be posted, under a threat of of being murdered if he revealed to any one his errand. errand.

* * * * * *

Hook appeared suddenly at his own house in New York, and found Fan at her post.

He spoke a few words in seeming kindness to her, listened to what she had to tell him, and then retired to his sanctum sanctorum.

Later in the night, Meg, at his request, attended him.

"Meg, my woman," he said, looking up at her with an expression in his eyes which always, as she forcibly ex-

pressed it, made her "back open and shut"; "I shall want you to prepare a room—a bed, for a new guest."

"Go on, sir."

"Very good; now listen, and mind all I say to you. I want you to prepare a room for a little boy. I want it to be comfortable, but I want it to be more than that. I don't want it to be examined by any eyes but yours and mine."

"Very well, sir."

* * * * * *

The next morning early, a man dressed as an officer of the navy, knocked at the door of No. 74 Commercial Street. The door was opened by a thin, grubby old man.

"I want to see the man of this house," said the man who knocked.

"I am the man of this house," replied the old man.

"You have a sailor lodging here?"

"No sailor lodging here."

"Named Snip?"

"Nobody named Snip, no such person," said the old man, about to close the door.

"Say you have!" insisted the man.

"Tell you I ain't," roared the grubby little man, and would have slammed the door, but the stranger sprang into the passage.

"Hallo, he-er!" cried the old man.

"Don't be ugly," exclaimed the intruder, "I must search for myself, I'm an officer, here's my search warrant."

He produced, as he spoke, a document, which appeared to be the proper instrument.

The little grubby man looked at it, and returned it. He believed in it, though he had not read a line.

"He ain't here," exclaimed the old man, "you're off the scent."

"I respect you, but I can't take your word; I must search the premises."

"I got only three lodgers in the house, one is——"

The self-asserted officer stopped the man.

"No use to waste time," he said. "I don't want to disturb anyone. You can accompany me. If the man ain't here, I can't have him; if he is, he must come with me."

He turned the key in the lock as he spoke, and the old man, shrugging his shoulders, led the way up-stairs.

The fake officer examined all the rooms, but found no one resembling the person he sought; and with a cross look, descended the stairs again.

"Told you so," said the old man.

"Ain't finished yet," said his companion. "You have underground apartments?"

"No—not a soul—nobody in them. I tell you not a soul; I say there ain't nobody in them," said the old man, placing himself before his unwelcome guest.

"Don't interfere with me in my duty, or I'll arrest you," he cried fiercely, as he swung the old man around.

He ran lightly down the stairs, and opened what appeared to be a kitchen door. It disclosed to his view four men, one in height towering very much above the rest. They were seated in earnest conversation when the door abruptly opened; but they sprang to their feet, and bent fierce looks upon the intruder.

His keen eyes ran swiftly round the room.

"I'm on the scent now," he thought.

Looking in the face of each man, he shook his head.

"Don't disturb yourselves, gentlemen," he said, "I don't see among you the man I want."

He turned and quitted the place; their glittering eyes turned in mystified and anxious inquiry upon him.

He proceeded to a door which, at the end of a small passage, seemed only to lead out to the back premises. He tried it; it was fastened.

"Open it," he said, to the old man.

"Nothing out there," cried the old man.

"You told me just now there was not a soul down here. Open the door, or I'll break it open."

"Hi! you can't want anything there, you know," cried a rough voice in his ear. A hand was laid forcibly upon his shoulder; he shook it off, and turned round. The tall man was before him, looking on him with savage eyes.

He had an officer's club, and held it up to the big fellow, at the same time a conviction filling his mind that he was approaching the object of his search.

"Don't you poke your nose between me and my duty, Mr. Gipsy Swift Lane," he said, sharply. "If you don't know me, I do you; I am a detective officer and I want a runaway seaman. I don't want you yet. I don't know how soon your presence may be asked for; when it is I shall call upon you. But take a word of caution from me and keep clear of me and my bracelets."

Taken aback, his suspicions disarmed, the gipsy only growled out, "if he wanted a sailor only, that was another thing;" but he kept close to the bogus officer. Then the old man, drawing a key from his pocket, opened the door, and he passed out with him on to an old wharf, which seemed to be used only to receive in accumulated heaps rusty iron articles, which having fulfilled the purposes for which they were originally

constructed, now were awaiting to be removed, to undergo some transformation known only to a select few.

At the end of this wharf, up in a corner abutment, was an old, much dilapidated brick wall, its face overlooking the river, and rising flush with the wharf side, was an oblong wooden house. Originally it had been a series of counting-houses, with a suite of rooms above; now it appeared from a cursory glance, to be disused.

"Nobody there?" said the officer.

"Why—ahem!—yes; there's a small family there, but no sailor," said the old man.

The man quickened his step. The gipsy touched him on the arm.

"Can't you believe the man?" he exclaimed, rather viciously. "I say there's no seaman there, and I'll take my oath on it."

"Ho! ho! your oath!" laughed the officer. "I don't want to inconvenience any one if I can help it," he said, "but I must do my duty."

"I tell you you'll only find a small family there—don't go to frighten them."

"I shall not be with them two seconds," was the reply, "if Tom Snips isn't hidden there."

The gipsy now approached the door and gave a signal knock with his knuckles.

The door slowly opened for a small space and the face of a gipsy woman obtruded through the narrow opening.

"All right, Zulie," exclaimed the gipsy; "just comin' in to look around. The gentleman comes to inspect the premises for a minute."

Zulie with a distrustful and exceeding reluctant air,

opened the door, and admitted them; but she kept her eye on the "gentleman" with a pertinacity which troubled him.

He grinned in her face.

"Know me again?" he said, sharply.

No one was below, and the party ascended the stairs, Zulie moving forward and occupying the place of the gipsy close to the elbow of the intruder.

The first room above contained an elderly man, a young dark-haired girl, and a pale-faced boy. The officer under the inspection of three pairs of glaring eyes, merely touched his hat with a semblance of respect, and said to the elderly man:

"Sorry to intrude; your friend will explain the cause of my visit."

He glanced immediately round the room, entered the next which overlooked the river, threw up the windows, looked out upon the dark waters below, made a swift inspection of the rooms, and returned to the room where yet sat the elderly man, the young girl and boy.

He took apparently no notice of them, and passed out with the grubby old man close on to his heels, and as he took his departure, he said:

"Somebody's got a spite against you, and they have thrown me off the scent."

"Told you so," exclaimed the grubby old man, rubbing his hands, glad to think the officer had been done.

"I'm off for Water Street, or thereabouts," said the officer.

A minute more, and the officer might have been seen hurrying at great speed toward the east side of the city.

Within two hours of that time, a boat dropped slowly down the river, rowed by a man in a sailor's dress.

He brought it up within two or three wharfs of the one visited that morning by the presumed detective officer. He made it fast, and then began putting it in order, as if expecting a passenger; but he always kept a glance upon the oblong house. When he had completed a task lazily done, he stretched himself at full length, with his face leaning on his folded arms, which rested on the stern of the boat; his eyes half covered by the lids, always fastened with catlike patience and immobility upon the oblong wooden house.

Night gradually drew on. The man was yet there. Lights glittered on the mast-heads from the bows and the cabin-windows of passing steam vessels, and along the banks of the river.

The man in the boat never changed his position, nor took his eyes from the wooden building.

The tide rose and swept upwards. The beat of the paddle wheels, the creak of swinging straining vessels, and the surging of the water, were the sounds alone heard.

When the darkness had so increased that objects at a comparatively short distance could not be perceived, another boat pulled up to the one which contained the solitary man.

"Hold on!" said a rough voice, in a low tone; "hold water hard."

The two boats were alongside of each other.

A few words were exchanged, and three men who were in the boat which had arrived, as passengers, now joined the solitary boatman. The waterman who had brought them then pulled his boat swiftly away, and was soon lost in the darkness.

As soon as they were alone, the man who had

passed a lonely vigil the whole day, said to one of his companions in a whisper:

"When do you go away?"

"Next tide. It will be high water at two o'clock."

"That will do," responded the man.

The boat was cast off, and with noiseless movement brought beneath the wall of the wharf the boatman had been watching the whole day.

Two of the men stealthily quitted the boat, crawled on the wharf, and darted into one of the sheds, the position of which had been pointed out to them.

Then all remained as silent as the grave. Suddenly the door of the house opened, and a woman came out. She walked with quiet step along the edge of the wharf its whole length, passed the boat just under her eyes, and did not see it.

"The air is cool," she said to herself, in a low tone. "The racing tide makes it fresh and moist; it will do the Chuck good. He is weak. I'll fetch him out; there's nobody about."

Not a word was lost. The heart of one of the men in the boat at least beat quickly.

Zulie—for she it was—put her head outside the door; she glanced round, and then she advanced, followed by a young girl supporting with her arm the delicate boy.

They walked up and down slowly.

"Harold," said Flora, "wouldn't you like Zulie to bring us out chairs, and we sit with our backs to the water and face the house. You know, Harold, we have been confined to the house all day; shall we not sit out here a little while?"

"Yes," said the boy. "Where is Grandpa Burdell?"

"In his chair asleep," answered Flora. "You do not want him, do you?"

"To sit with us," returned the boy.

"When he wakes he will, dear Harold," answered Flora. "Kind Zulie will bring the chairs for us now, will she not?"

"Ay! will she," replied the gipsy; "and if grandpa wakes he shall come here too."

As she approached the door three shadows fell upon them; Zulie received a tremendous blow behind the ear, which felled her insensible to the ground. The next moment a cloth was thrown over the girl; she and the boy were whipped up and handed over the dock into the boat. The boy uttered a terrified wail, but the man who held him, placed his hard, horny hand over his mouth, and the boat pushed off.

The oars were tossed out, and the two men commenced pulling the boat with their utmost strength.

"Give way!" cried a voice, in a low earnest tone; the men obeyed with a will.

Swiftly their boat darted down-river and was made to hug the shore until it came to a quiet landing. Three of the men landed and taking up the boy and girl hurried up the street, placing them in a close carriage at the corner of a dark street; both the girl and boy had fainted.

When the carriage stopped near the corner of a street the coachman jumped down; well acquainted with his work, he raised a trap door over which unsuspecting persons walked in daytime.

He hurried to the carriage, and the man inside passed into his arms the yet senseless Flora.

"By hokey pokey!" ejaculated the man, in a tone of fright; "its a body."

"Fool!" hissed his employer through his teeth; "it's my daughter, Fan; carry her down."

The man obeyed, and his companions followed. When below, among bales and packages, the coachman deposited his burden, and springing up the ladder, closed the trap and drove away.

Another instant the intense darkness was broken by an advancing light, and the man who stood there cried in exulting tone:

"Quick—quick, Meg, my woman! take in your arms my prize, my fortune, my goldmine. Hook Flint has tricked them all."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"GRACE, you ruffle my temper sadly when I hear you persist in harping on the old strain. You must not—you shall not continue so. You must leave this place, and at once."

"When you please," replied Grace, calmly. "To go—where, I care not, so that it be not to appear in the society with which you mix."

Mildred gave a smile of derision, or disdain—Grace could not say which—but she felt its sting.

"When I tell you," said Mildred, in even tones, "that you must remain here, it is to decide a question of health, and not of pride; to make you a proposition, to which I imagine you will not object. It is this: Milroy is away, will remain away some time; I, likewise, have some pressing business on hand, which will take up my time. Now, as you have expressed yourself pleased with Falcon Manor and its scenery, it occurred to me that you would like to pay it a visit,

even though you went there alone. There you will obtain what you seem now not to get here—fresh air, and pleasant changing scenes to divert your intractable mind from dwelling upon subjects which you seem to make a point of rendering unnecessarily painful."

Falcon Manor! She had not thought of it; yet what a haven of rest it seemed to appear to her the moment Mildred named it!

The chapel in the plantation of the black pines uprose and presented itself to her mental vision. What might she not learn for herself concerning that mystery?

"If I thought you attached any value to my thanks," she said to her, with affected warmth, "I would offer them to you with sincerity; but I know you hold them of little worth. Still, I thank you. It would not be possible for you to have made a proposition which, in my present frame of mind, could be so acceptable to me."

"The carriage shall be at the door at ten to-morrow morning. Anticipating your ready assent, I have made the necessary arrangements. Your maid will accompany you. The servants at Falcon Manor have their instructions, they will be prepared to receive you and to obey your orders. I shall join you there as soon as I am at liberty. Until then, farewell! I, myself, leave New York this evening."

She bent over Grace and kissed her on the cheek; then she left the room. Grace could not help feeling surprised, but she said nothing. She immediately proceeded to make the necessary preparations for her departure, unable at the same time to help wondering what had originated the proposal for her visit to Fal-

con Manor, and why Mildred had so abruptly left New York, and alone.

The next evening she found herself in the old-fashioned but spacious mansion of Falcon Manor. The journey had passed over without incident.

It was not without a feeling of nervous excitement, that Grace found herself alone in the room which overlooked the plantation of the black pines. She stood with her eyes fixed in a settled gaze upon the dreary mass of trees, which had obtained for themselves a reputation not very favorable for miles around. Even then she had decided upon penetrating into the recesses of that plantation, and to do this previous to the appearance of Mildred at Falcon Manor.

She scarcely changed the fixed attention with which she regarded them. If her eyes did for a moment wander over other parts of the varied landscape, a strange fascination drew them back again to the dismal cluster of black pines.

As the deepening twilight began to close the surrounding objects in, and to throw into solid masses hill and dale, Grace remembered only too vividly the midnight hour passed upon the top of the tower.

She wondered whether the scene she then beheld would be re-enacted. Would the strange figure she that night perceived again emerge from the shadows of the old house, and flying with swift step across the open space, dive into the plantation of the dark pines and be seen no more?

What if she were, when the household was asleep, to ascend to the top of the tower and watch—better prepared than before to observe—and if the incident were repeated, to endeavor to ascertain who really was the stranger that night?

And so passed that day, and others.

This really could not go on, if she desired to tempt the mysteries of the building beneath the gloomy pines. Mildred would not be long away, Milroy Falcon might return at any moment. If she did not intend to lose the only opportunity she might ever have, it would be necessary to call forth all her powers of endurance and make the attempt.

She had in the broad daytime visited the room in the top of the tower.

The domestics of Falcon Manor retired early every night. They had never seen anything to confirm the superstitious fears they entertained, but they had rather a wholesome impression that it was better not to run the chances of witnessing sights, the mere mention of which made their blood run cold. So she had little to fear from interruption from the living, and she laughed away scornfully fancies which presented themselves that she might encounter the supernatural.

That night she sat up in her sleeping-room, keeping her eyes fixed upon her watch, and listening to the slow solemn chimes of the tower clock. When the hands on the gold dial of the watch pointed to the quarter hour to midnight, she rose up, and taking a small lamp, left her apartment.

With noiseless step she ascended the tower stairs, and placed herself where Mildred had stationed her on New Year's Eve. She set down her lamp where its light would be hidden, and then gazed out upon the vast space.

Dark though it was, the moon having sunk an hour or more, she could still distinguish the places which the snow on a former occasion had made so visible; and her eyes, with eager interest, traced out the spot

where she had first beheld the dark figure of a man. She marked the course he then took, and noted the spot where he had disappeared.

Suddenly the hour of midnight boomed from the tower clock. She uttered a faint scream. The sound smote her ear at an unprepared moment, and she had not recovered from its effects when the last note died away.

Still she bent her eyes eagerly upon the park below, placing her hand upon her beating heart to still its throbbings. Far and near she looked, but all remained motionless and silent. No cry rose up to chill her blood. No shadow flitted across the park to disturb her.

"It was Milroy Falcon I saw that night," she murmured, to herself. "Mildred had some remarkable purpose in bringing me here to see him. She did not foresee that he would bring me to the chapel beneath the dark pines, nor that he would commence a revelation which she interrupted by her abrupt and unexpected appearance. I know not how much I may then learn," she continued, thoughtfully. "Alone, and unchecked in my researches, who can tell what I may discover? It is plain there is no one to interrupt me at present—and——"

She paused, as her eyes fell upon the black figure of a man, who seemed to glide from a spot in the vicinity of the house. She saw it stop when fronting the tower, and there it remained for a few minutes, motionless, as though it was regarding the building; then it moved slowly away, and disappeared in the plantation as before.

Her heart seemed to suspend its action while her eyes watched the movements of the figure, and then

she waited with an emotion of thrilling excitement for the wild cry of anguish, that the incident of the former night might be wholly enacted again. But time went slowly on—and it came not. The tower clock chimed the hour of one, and no other sound had fallen upon her ear. So she slowly descended from the tower, and retired to bed, though not to sleep until dawn peeped into her room.

The day was overcast, but she heeded not that; and after partaking of a light breakfast, she set out to dare the perils of her remarkable explorations.

On she went. Soon she found that she had not the clue to the maze, and she wandered down the alleys formed by trees stretching in various directions, until she felt exhausted and was obliged to seat herself to rest. She now resolved to give up the search for that day, and to make the endeavor to retrace her steps; deciding on entering by a different path the following day, but not to give up the quest until she had been successful.

As her eyes roamed down the successive vistas formed by the tall pine stems, they suddenly rested upon a dark object which rose up at the end of one of them.

Her heart beat rapidly.

"It is the place!" she ejaculated, and rose up. She advanced with light step but swiftly toward it, and paused not until she stood before the building.

She examined the door, and remembering how Milroy Falcon unfastened it, followed his example, and without difficulty removed the bar. The door slowly opened, and she peered into the darkness. She could not help feeling an emotion of awe as she stepped into the gloom; but she nerved herself to the task she had undertaken, and went on. It was not until nearly a min-

ute had elapsed that she could discover the narrow winding stairs; but soon as she perceived them she immediately approached and descended into the crypt beneath. A few steps and she faced the illuminated window, and gazed upon the pale face of her who seemed now in wailing accents to cry to her, "*Remember thou that I am avenged!*"

Instinctively she drew nearer to the window, her eyes fascinated by that pale, smitten face, said to so resemble her own. While yet gazing on it, her bosom heaving and tears welling to her eyes, the sound of a stealthy footstep descending the circular stairs smote her ears.

For an instant she was paralyzed. She stood motionless, her face only turned toward the entrance.

A ray of light, colored by a pale blue pane of the stained window, settled on her face, and gave it an unearthly look.

Another minute, and the form of a man appeared before her. She saw his pale face. He started, as his eyes encountered her. He appeared awe-stricken. He clapped his hands to his temples with a wild cry, then over his eyes, as though to shut her out from his sight.

She was so overcome by surprise, that she was riveted to the spot; and though she strove to speak, she could not articulate a word. Suddenly he removed his hands, and sunk upon his knees; he stretched his hands toward her, apostrophized her in passionate language, as though she were a spirit; and as he proceeded with intense rapidity, his excitement increased, until in strong convulsions he fell at her feet.

CHAPTER XIX.

As Oscar Ross was perfectly satisfied that the bargain which was to cause Hook Flint some trouble to secure was Harold Burdell, and the "few miles" extended quite as far as Jesse Lings' door, it was only natural that he should possess a little curiosity as to the result of his keen friend's venture.

Fan had begged him not to make his appearance at her father's house during his absence, and he had thought it advisable to comply with the entreaty for more than one reason.

Ever since he had parted with Nan Lings, he had felt like one crouching beneath some terrible phantom of evil. It was impossible for him to forget her words, on parting with him, that she would haunt him evermore while she lived as a spectre.

He was anxious to hear from Nan. His guilty mind conjured up incidents to follow the return of Nan, which filled him with apprehension.

Despite his anxiety, however, he had no conception that a note for him was lying at the appointed spot nearly as soon as it had arrived. He had made calculations, and they were none of them realized. His position was a harassing one.

When two days had elapsed he went to the postoffice and found a letter had been awaiting him two days. He tore it open with eager fingers. The contents were hurriedly scrawled and misspelt. With no little trouble and patience he deciphered the contents, which informed him that old Burdell and the boy Harold were

at the Commercial Docks along the river-front, and that Hook Flint was acquainted with the fact.

Over to the place named in the note he flew. He walked up and down, until he landed in the neighborhood of the docks. As he proceeded through the close thoroughfares, he did not notice that his footsteps were dogged. Threading his way with the air of one well-acquainted with the mazes of the locality, he entered a narrow street, formed of dirty-looking houses. He had not proceeded far, when suddenly he received a violent blow under the ear, and fell to the ground stunned.

Scarcely a second elapsed, and the body of Oscar Ross was no longer in the street.

A weaker man than Oscar Ross would have been killed by the severe blow he received, but it was only enough to keep him in a state of utter unconsciousness for some hours.

He came to a dim sense that he was being shaken and jolted in some vehicle ; then that the motion ceased, and that he was roughly seized, dragged along into some place, thrown heavily upon the floor and left alone, for the place became as silent as the grave. While thus half-aroused from the stupor into which he had been thrown, he felt like a man wholly overpowered and helpless from drink.

He had a sense that he was surrounded by persons unfriendly to him; that he was hauled here and dragged there, like a sack of salt; but he had not the strength to raise a hand.

After lying where he had been thrown, undisturbed and motionless, for more than an hour, his faintness by degrees began to subside, and his dim eyes began to discern objects. He found that he could stretch out

his arms and legs; and as he was about to rise, a body of water was violently dashed in his face, and threw him back. It was repeated; then a rough cloth was rubbed over his face and his mouth forced open and some brandy poured down his throat.

These restoratives had the desired effect. After he had by violent efforts escaped from choking, he pressed his hands over his eyes; then he removed them, and saw standing before him, glaring upon him with burning eyes, Swift, Lane old Burdell, and Zulie.

Oscar's first impulse was to feel for his revolver. Swift Lane, with the howl of a famished wolf, yelled:

"'Tain't there—it's here!"

He pointed, as he spoke, the polished barrel at the head of Ross, the muzzle being within a foot of his head. Oscar Ross shrank back.

"Whar's the boy?" screamed Zulie. "Whar's the boy, you unthrottled adder!"

"Whar's the boy?—tell me, wretched villain, what you have done with him and my beloved girl! Speak, wretch! for your life is worth but a few minutes' purchase if you remain silent!" exclaimed the old man, in excited tones.

"Ay, out with it!" roared Swift Lane, "and quickly too, or I'll give you a bullet!"

Oscar cast his eyes sullenly around him, and measured with rapid glance his chances of escape. To knock the pistol up with a sudden dash, and, in a sharp wrestle with Swift, to fling him to the earth, would be no difficult task, even weak though he was—for he was no mean amateur in the art if flinging a back fall;—but there was Zulie, quick and cat-like. He knew that she would spring upon him, and bury a knife to the handle in his back without compunction or hesi-

tation. Yet, even if he contrived to elude her murderous activity, he should not know where to fly. He had no conception where he had been brought, or what were the means of escape. It seemed he had only time to glance his bloodshot eyes around, and sullenly say, in reply to the question put to him:

"What boy are you talking about? Do you mean the child I paid Hanks to obtain for me?"

"Of course!" yelled Zulie. "The pet Chuck, whar is he?"

"How do you think I know?" roared Ross. "You took him from me, you beldam, didn't you? How am I to know what game you'd play with him?"

"Scoundrel, this faithful creature restored him to me," cried old Burdell; "but you have stolen him away since!"

"I have done nothing of the kind," cried Ross.

"Liar!" shrieked Zulie. "Liar and thief! You, in the dark hour of night, you struck me to the earth with a blow that almost killed me, and you and your fellows scooped off with the bonniest flower that ever grew, and the poor girl too!"

"What, Flora?"

"Oh, you know the name then, do you?" sneered Swift. "Come, look sharp, and tell us where the boy is, or I'll blow your skull to atoms! You have had one tap, you know."

"Yes," chimed in Zulie, with a gulping chuckle. "That's from me."

"I owe that to you, do I, eh?" said Ross, turning on her a fiery glance.

"Will you speak, wretch!" thundered old Burdell. "Reveal where you have taken the boy and girl, or I leave you to your fate."

"It is true, then, that they are gone?"

A roar of execration burst from the lips of the three.

"True!" screamed Zulie, shaking her bony hand in his face. "You know it is, you've got them! Where are they?—that's all we want you to say."

"I ain't agoin' to stand any tomfoolery!" roared Swift, and pressed the cold muzzle of the pistol against Ross's forehead. "Do you feel it?" he cried. "If you don't speak at once, I'll spatter your brains on that wall."

"Permit me to suggest," exclaimed Ross, as he coolly raised his hand and removed the barrel from his forehead, where it left a red ring, "that the pistol you hold in your hand has a hair-trigger, and if it is handled too roughly there will be no necessity to pull it, as it will discharge without as much trouble as you use at present."

"So much the worse for you," said Swift.

"Worse still for you," returned Ross.

"Tell me," cried the old man, "what are the motives which induced you to carry off my boy and girl?"

"Necessary motives certainly actuated me to get Harold Burdell into my possession, and influenced me when I employed one of the fraternity to which your friends belong to bring him to me."

"You were hired to do the work?" said the old man.

"You are too inquisitive, my elderly friend."

"I repeat, you have been hired for the base and villainous work? It is worth your while to choose between your life and revealing who has employed you—for much as I despise Whitney Falcon Burdell, I gave him credit for not descending to a meanness so degrading as this."

"Oh," sneered Ross.

"As you hope for liberation, state where you have conveyed him, and at whose instigation you have acted in the foul conspiracy."

"Be you so kind as to listen to me quietly, and don't interrupt me," returned Ross. "Now, sir, you can believe me or not, as you will; but I am delivering myself of truths only when I say that, upon my word, I have not set my eyes upon the girl Flora since I saw her in your cottage, nor on Harold Burdell since he was torn from my arms by a party of persons in a woods within an hour after I had purchased him for a round sum."

"What?" cried old Burdell and Swift together.

"Lies! all lies!" exclaimed Zulie.

"Not lies, but facts, you old hag!" exclaimed Ross. "I confess to having intended to obtain him once more if I could, but I have been forestalled, outwitted, outgeneraled and swindled. The boy has been kidnapped, but not by me; and I must confess my great wonder at the poor young girl being forced away from her home and her friends. Why she has been taken, I am utterly at a loss to understand."

There was something so real and earnest in Ross's utterance of these remarks, that they induced old Burdell to believe him, though they had no such effect upon Swift and Zulie.

"I'm not to be gammoned, Mr. Jack Duke——"

"Ross, I'd swear it if I died the next minute!" interrupted Zulie, licking her parched lips.

"Swear it then, and die!" said Ross, fiercely.

"Be quiet, Zulie," cried Swift.

"Not she," said Ross, with a savage grin. "Her brimstone's boiling over, and she must let it run."

"Look a-here man," cried Swift. "I have tracked

your boat—where it laid all the day long, where it landed when you went down the river with your ill-gotten prize—and then I traced you in a cab; but there I am at fault, except that I caught you near the spot. So, you see, it's of no use lying to me, for I'll have the secret out of you, or I will blow your brains out and fling you into the river that's flowing under your window."

"Truly, you are putting me into possession of valuable information," replied Ross. "A boat all day long—going down the river at night—landing near where you took me at a slight advantage, and announced your presence in a way I am not going to forget—that's all worth knowing. Now, mark me, my long, but not friendly acquaintance, I know nothing of the capture of the boy and girl, but what you tell me. Nevertheless, that information tells me where they are, and who has taken them."

All three gazed upon him in great surprise. Was he really speaking the truth? Burdell eyed him sharply.

"You swear," he said, "that you have had nothing to do with the last abduction of my boy?"

"I do," replied Ross.

"You add that you have been outgeneraled. Now, retaliate upon the man who has swindled you, reveal to me the place in which he has secreted them, and I will gratify your mercenary motives by a liberal reward."

"Tell—tell!" champed Zulie.

"Wait until to-morrow morning," said Ross, boldly.

Swift uttered a yell of derision, while Zulie shook her knife in the air, and absolutely danced under the influence of her wrathful scorn.

"Why don't you ask me to carry you back to where I took you from, and then to call on you somewhere

some day next week, to see if you have made up your mind?" roared Swift.

"Peace!" said Burdell, in an authoritative tone. "I am still disposed to believe you," he said to Ross, "and I will give you until to-morrow morning to give an answer in the affirmative or negative;—and if against us you must be prepared for the worst result."

"Agreed," said Ross. "As I decide, so shall I anticipate the result."

"You will remain locked in here a prisoner until the morning," added the old man; "and then I will myself come to hear your determination."

"And I," muttered Swift, with a scowl of ferocity.

"And I," said Zulie, trying to moisten her hot lips.

"I must have something to eat," cried Jack Ross, quickly.

"You shall not starve," quietly responded the old man. "Remember," he added, "your life hangs on your decision."

He beckoned Swift and Zulie away, and then quitted the room.

Ross heard them lock the room door on the outside; and after remaining quiet a short time, he rose up, and feeling that he was being watched, paced up and down the room. Then he walked carelessly to the window, and resting his elbows on the sash, looked out.

The river was before him. It was wide at this part, and the tide was racing down, and had about three hours to fall. Still, it washed up against the base of the building in which he was confined. He could swim like a fish, and his mind was made up as to the course he should pursue.

Food was brought in by Swift; but not a word was exchanged between them. He left him, and locked the room door on the outside as before. Ross ate greedily of the food until satisfied, and then he lay down again and fell asleep.

He woke up suddenly; the room was in utter darkness. He heard a distant church clock strike two. He then commenced silently to remove the best portion of his clothing.

Three o'clock chimed from the distant clock. He rose, and with stealthy step, advanced to the window and looked out. It was high water.

He drew the window up, inch by inch, without a sound. Then he mounted on to the sill, and looked below. He paused not to reflect, but clasping his hands above his head, shot forth and descended into the river.

The sound of his plunge into the water was loud, but it died away quickly; and presently his head emerged from the surface, and his white shoulders might be seen above it, while he breasted the stream, making boldly for the middle; as he feared to attempt to land on either side of the building, because as soon as he was missed a hot search along the shore, up and down, was sure to be made for him, and he would hardly be given credit for an attempt to swim across the river. On he went, swimming across the river fast and well; but the tide was strong, the water chill, and he had miscalculated his own powers.

He redoubled his efforts, as he got further out; but gradually he felt as if he was growing paralyzed, and that he could not keep afloat much longer. Water began to pour into his mouth, and a ringing sound took possession of his ears.

Death was blinding his eyes, death was looming in his ears! Hopeless death! Despair had seized him, when his dim eyes caught sight of a boat, towing at the stern of ship which had just passed him. Impelled by the swift motion of the vessel, it swayed and brushed his face. He with a frenzied last exertion of strength, reached up, and caught the gunwale of the boat. To have for a second discontinued his desperate efforts would have been to slip powerless back into the water, and to sink to the bottom like a stone; he therefore continued his almost superhuman efforts, and succeeded in crawling in and falling partly across and along the bottom of the boat, senseless.

CHAPTER XX.

BEFORE Grace could recover from the terror into which she had been thrown by the sudden presence of a stranger in the crypt, and the amazement created by his earnest address to her, couched in fervent and eloquent language, appealing to her as though she was a spirit from another world, he fell convulsed at her feet, and remained motionless. Despite the wild tumultuous beating of her heart, she still had sufficient nerve left to bend over the prostrate form of the intruder.

His face was pale and wan; and his features, though haggard from care and a long-nourished sorrow, were noble in their form and patrician in character. His closed eyes and his mouth slightly open, so strongly resembled death, that Grace started back horrified; but another glance showed her that it was but insensibility, and that he would recover.

That motionless face strangely affected her, and at-

tracted her toward him. A sigh burst from her lips. Then, like a startled fawn, she fled up the stone steps to the place of egress, which was as dark as night.

The door was closed. She knew not where it was situated, and with a choking horror groped round the walls, fancying each second as she did so that she heard ascending steps in pursuit of her.

After an anxious search, she found an iron knob, the door yielded, and gently and noiselessly it opened toward her, admitting at once light and air.

She could hardly repress a cry of delight as she darted into the plantation with the swiftness of a doe. She hurried through the long alleys, unheeding—indeed, unknowing—the direction she was taking; but she paused not until she found herself close to Falcon Manor. She proceeded hastily on, passed round to the front of the house, and halted not until secure in her own sitting-room.

For two or three days she did not move out of the house; but then her restlessness overcame other feelings, and she ventured forth once more. She shrank from again attempting to enter the plantation of black pines; nevertheless, she was unable wholly to keep away from their precincts. Some invisible power, it seemed, impelled her in their direction; and however widely she might at the commencement of her walk in the morning have diverged from them, she invariably soon found herself somewhere in close proximity to the gloomy pines.

A strain of thought one morning wholly absorbed her, and removed all surrounding things from her observation, as in the deep solitudes of the aged wood adjoining the park she moved slowly on.

Suddenly she was startled, and aroused from her con-

temptation by the sound of a human voice, which spoke in earnest, frightened tones:

"Merciful heaven, support me!"

She raised her eyes, and before her stood transfixed in wild amazement, the stranger of the ancient crypt beneath the plantation of the black pines.

Her astonishment at this unexpected apparition was heightened by the close resemblance this man bore to one of the old portraits which hung in the gallery at Falcon Manor. He almost glared upon her with extended eyes, and stretching out his hands imploringly, said:

"If you are mortal and have human charity, speak to me!"

"Your question is a strange one. Pray, sir, who and what are you, and why are you here?"

He turned his face and spread his outstretched hands upward in fervent adoration.

"Are you, too, a Falcon?" asked Grace.

He drew himself up and was about to reply; but as though some consideration flashed through his mind, he checked himself, and said:

"It is needful that I should for the present conceal even from you—for it would seem that I should have no fear—not only who and what I am, but why I am here. I may say, that it is no evil purpose which has occasioned my visit. We shall meet again. I will not say where or when. I will leave that to circumstances. On the next occasion you will probably find me more explicit concerning myself than I have been, but the time must be more fitting and the object more ripe than now. One thing I have to ask of you—it is a strange request, perhaps, but it is important to me that it should be granted. It is that you will not volunteer any ac-

count of the meetings which have taken place between us. Reserve that for the present. A time may, I hope will come, when the revelation may be highly necessary; but until then, conceal. Hark! I hear a footstep. Farewell, O living resemblance to one dearer to me than life itself. We shall meet again."

Grace turned away and plunged yet deeper into the woods, in a whirl of wonder at this unexpected interview. She paused not until she had reached the brook, and there she seated herself to ponder over what she had heard.

She had not been seated long when she uttered a scream of terror, for a hand was laid with a sudden pressure upon her shoulder.

She leaped to her feet, and beheld standing calmly and impassively before her, Mildred Dupont. A cold smile was on her lips.

"Still timid, Grace!" she exclaimed. "Come, let us return to the house. You did not expect me?"

"I was prepared for your return to Falcon Manor at any moment."

"Not in the black pines?" said Mildred, with a taunting smile.

"Not in the black pines," repeated Grace, with emphasis.

"On my arrival I heard you were out walking. I set out in search of you, and saw you walking toward the brook. I followed, and observed your actions. I was pleased, very pleased to find that contemplation, and not idle or weak curiosity, directed your steps."

Silence followed this remark until they reached the house.

There was a strange bustle and activity in the house which disturbed her, but she attributed it to the arrival

of Mildred. She had reached the centre of the morning-room, where her eye caught sight of a figure reclining on a couch.

She turned hastily, and beheld a face pale and wan, but with his large dark eyes fixed upon her in steadfast admiration, Wilton Granger.

CHAPTER XXI.

AFTER Hook Flint, assisted by Meg, had conducted Flora and Harold Burdell to the room prepared for them, and had seen them restored to consciousness, he retired to his sanctum to cogitate. Assured that he was alone, he soliloquized:

"Ho! ho! mine, mine, mine, under lock and key! No one but myself and my faithful Meg knows where they are. The seaman I employed has been obliged to ship at one hour's notice to escape the searching inquiries and unwelcome presence of those pests of society, detective officers. I am sure of them. Well, no one saw us quit the wharf, no one saw us land. Lurching Dick, who drove us, didn't know what he carried until the last moment, and then I put him on a wrong scent by telling him that it was Fan he held in his arms. If he didn't believe it, he dared not speak. And now, with the double prizes in my possession, let me consider what is to be done. Whose purse will bleed most freely—that of Whitney Falcon Burdell, or Miss Mildred Dupont? Let me look at the documents again; they may decide for me."

He rose up, and carefully taking out a small bunch of keys, went to his iron safe, unlocked it, and from among the stores of precious stones therein, drew out

the package containing the papers he had purloined from Ross.

After carefully reading them, he decided to keep both Whitney Burdell and Mildred Dupont in negotiation, and be governed by circumstances in electing the course he should finally adopt.

He carefully refolded the documents, restored them to the iron safe, and proceeded to lock it.

The keys were gone!

It was only with a great exertion of self-control that he did not utter a scream of astonishment.

"Gone! gone where? How gone? Who has taken them?"

The blade of a huge knife gleamed in his eyes. He caught it up from the table, and taking up his lamp, slowly commenced to explore all the parts of his room where it was possible for any person to secrete himself.

All of a sudden his lamp went out.

"Who? who?" he hissed, between his teeth, while his fingers clutched the hilt of his knife. "Who—who is it? Oh, let me know them, let me know them!"

With racking brain and tottering step he searched closely over the room, but could find no one within it, and he was staggered to find that the key was turned in the lock in the door just as it had been by him when he first entered the room.

He sat down and awaited with impatience the coming of Meg, and when that aged servant, who had so long and faithfully served him, tapped at the door, he let her in with unusual eagerness. Having locked the door again, he hurried her to the table. Fastening his lurid eyes upon her, he said:

"Where's Fan?"

The old woman uttered an ejaculation of surprise, and Hook sharply repeated his question.

"Abed," replied the old woman.

"How do you know?" inquired Hook, sharply.

"Just left her," said the old woman, turning white.

"If she is in bed, what did you want in her room?" he inquired, sharply. "Quick, answer quickly—no lies, you know! They won't do for me; I always see 'em as they drop out of your mouth."

"Girl's hard worked—she ain't well—fretting—no mother—always goes into her room—sees her the last thing."

"Um!" grunted Hook. "Awake, eh?"

"No—asleep," she returned.

He then told her what had happened.

"Ghost!" she said, with a shiver. She looked cowerингly around the room. "I am sure this place is haunted," she added, with a terrified air.

"You are an old fool," he replied. "Now, listen to me. There is something wrong in all this. I don't like the appearance of it. My suspicions are roused, and you know when once they are roused, it is not easy to allay them. If any one has succeeded in obtaining access here, and my distrust at present points only to one person, I say let 'em beware; for if I discover them, whoever it may be, who it is, they shall die—and that speedily. No weak feeling will stay my hand, I will have no mercy."

"Don't mean me, do you?" said Meg, with a gasp.

"You know well who I mean. Now tell me about your new visitors. How did you leave them?"

"The boy is fretful and peevish, but the gal has got sense and courage. She says that she knows that no harm is meant to her or the boy, but she thinks it hard that

they should be hidden away in one place and another, and made unhappy because of the bad ambition of wicked people."

"Ahe! did she say that? Let them have plenty of toys, Meg, and plenty of sweet stuff. Children like both. I want, if I can, to deliver him up healthy and in good condition. Great Scott, if he should die on my hands!"

CHAPTER XXII.

When Oscar Ross had somewhat recovered from the effects of his dip in the water, he found the vessel, whose boat he was in, had been drawn up alongside of a wharf. He had not passed with comparative safety through so many desperate dangers during his life, not to possess the ability to accomplish his exit from the boat unseen, and succeeded in arriving before daylight at his boarding-house.

Three days later he started out to make discoveries. Just as Hook Flint's store was about to be closed for the night, he stood before Fan.

She started up in affright. She caught him by the wrist, and raised her finger warningly.

"Oh, do not speak, and leave this place instantly! Your life is in danger!"

"Bless you, my little cherub. Nevertheless, in spite of all the favors he intends me, I must see him. I may just as well hang or drown myself if I do not, and so save him and everybody else any further trouble about me."

Raising her finger again, as a signal to impose silence, she went on tip-toe to a corner of the store, where there

was a large stock of goods, and motioned him to get behind them.

He obeyed with a light step.

Scarcely a minute passed before he heard Hook Flint speaking to her, with a harsh brutality which made him open and shut his hands instinctively.

The store was closed by the man for that purpose; the lights were turned out, and everything around him was plunged into profound darkness.

A few minutes more and he felt a soft hand touch his. He placed his left hand upon her shoulder, while she held his right. They went along a level space for a short distance, then down-stairs, and so into a room. She fastened the door, and then lit a light.

"Oh, Oscar, my father has said such dreadful things of you! Tell me they are not true, that you are not——"

"What?" he whispered, hoarsely, in her ear.

"I dare not—oh, I cannot tell you such dreadful words."

"What Hook Flint may say or has said of me, I personally hold in scorn; yet, Fan, he may have spoken much that is true. I have been no angel; and were you to know my true history, you would, Fan—as I have no doubt you have been directed by him to do—shun me. Understand this one thing, Fan. I have told you many times I love you, yet those words, so serious in their import, were said by me lightly, and without reflection."

She would have shrunk from him, but he held her fast.

"But I love you now, oh, I know that I love you now! Be this the proof, I would rather die the death of a hunted whelp than suffer that love to injure you

in thought or deed. All that is dangerous in such love as mine will be averted from you. My love for you, Fan, shall be that of the dearest friend on earth. I will watch over you like a spirit while I have life; I will guard you; if need be, guide you. So long as the shield of my protection—frail and insecure as my position may be—can extend over you, it shall. My love shall not harm you, Fan. I will be true and honorable to you, I swear it! And when I cease to be, any death will be too good for me."

She sank sobbing on his breast, and he bent his head over her, in tears too.

O, poor little Fan, what bliss to her to listen to such words! She believed him—and felt so happy as she rested like a child upon his breast.

Ross was roused from his abstraction by a short dry cough. He started from his position, and Fan with alarm from hers. Both beheld regarding them the old woman Meg.

"Look here, Mr. Smartcut, I wants to talk about her, because she's the only thing that loves me yet," she said, her features softening. "I heard you say that you love her truthfully and faithfully."

"And so I do, by all that is sacred!"

"Now," said the old woman, "I am satisfied; and now I'll serve you both. If I can't outwit that old miser, deep, shrewd, and artful as he is—well, I'll swallow the arsenic he has mixed up for me to take. Now, Fan, my pet, you come with me." Then she bade Ross to remain where he was.

As soon as they were gone, Ross drew from his coat a new revolver.

"I don't like to be without a friend such as this," he muttered, "Hook is so prompt to think and act."

In about ten minutes Meg appeared at the secret door. She beckoned him, and he followed her.

"Not a word," she whispered; "but when you stop where I shall place you, count one hundred ere you push open the door before you."

He assented, and then they went noiselessly on along a circuitous, narrow and dark passage. Suddenly the old woman whispered,

"Count!"

Then he found that she had left him, and he commenced to repeat the numerals up to one hundred. At the last figure he pushed open the door and peeped in. There was a strong light, but he could not see Hook. He saw a circuitous route between some packages, and he adopted it; as he drew near, the quick ear of Hook caught the sound of his footsteps. He seized up the knife he always kept under his hand, and made a dash forward.

"Is that you, Meg, my woman?" he almost yelled.

But he felt himself at the same moment suddenly seized from behind, and he was swung around with amazing force, as a voice cried:

"No, it is not Meg! It is I, Oscar Ross!"

Hook staggered back. Before him stood Ross, firm and collected, presenting a pistol at his head. He pointed to the seat his "friend" always occupied.

"Sit," he said, "I want to pick a bone with you, my crafty infant."

Hook scowled at him like a tiger, but the light from the lamp flashed along the bright barrel of the pistol, and he crawled round the table and sank like a bag on his chair.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HOOK FLINT had never for a second foreseen that at an unprepared moment Ross would confront him like a spectre, armed with a terrible weapon, in his own sanctum when he was alone. Yet here it was, a startling fact.

Hook thought of Fan, and grated his teeth. The cowering form of the old woman, Meg, slowly passed before his bloodshot eyes. As the horrid thoughts and murderous intention passed through his brain, he became conscious that the bright eyes of Ross were fastened on his.

A ghastly smile moved his lips; he winked with both eyes and nodded.

Ross leaned over the table, and his pistol, held in a firm steady hand, covered Hook's head.

He sat speechless and breathless.

Ross broke the silence.

"You don't appear to have expected me, Hook, my estimable, though slightly overreaching, colleague," he said, with a hiss.

"Mr. Ross—I beg pardon, Major De Montrose," exclaimed Hook, with a sneer, "go on."

"Well then, Hook, to be brief, I employed you to assist me in accomplishing a woman's revenge——"

"A—a woman's revenge?" interposed Hook.

"You know well what I mean—don't interrupt me," continued Ross, with a frown. "One part of the scheme by which her hatred was to be sated was to obtain possession of a boy, one——"

"Harold Burdell!" replied Hook, hurriedly. "Yes, yes, I know all that. You, unknown to any one but yourself, went in search of him, discovered him, obtained him, and—lost him, eh, Ross my friend?—lost him, eh, my friend?"

"Lost him, I admit," replied Ross, in the same tone. "I was overpowered by numbers, and he was snatched from me. You then took up the search."

"Me, Mr. Ross?"

Ross raised the pistol to his head, and Hook started back.

"Now, Hook, my infant, I want an interview with the girl and boy."

Hook found it hard to display a calm demeanor, and made some attempt to clear his throat, and said:

"You have made a statement, Mr. Ross, but it is only a statement, unsupported by a single proof."

With a sudden action Ross placed himself immediately before Hook, and presented the pistol within an inch of his temple. He then cried:

"Restore to me those papers you stole from me when I was staying here. Quick! falter, hesitate, and I send a bullet crashing through your brain."

"I cannot—oh, I cannot!" cried Hook, sinking down on his knees. "They have been stolen from me."

"Bah!" cried Ross. "Stolen from you?"

"I am bewildered—overwhelmed—almost mad! Look at those papers, Ross. Are they of the same size you lost?"

"Lost!" echoed Ross, with a hoarse laugh.

He laid the pistol for a moment on the table, and examined them. He drew forth those Hook had substituted for the genuine ones in his pocket-book, and

measured. They were both folded in the same manner, and were of the exact size.

"Wait, Ross, my friend," exclaimed Hook, suddenly. 'There is one chance left. I will go and search in another place. Oh, never fear, Ross, they shall be disgorged. Remain quiet here for a few minutes; I'll be back soon."

Hook hurried out of the room, and Ross heard the door close after him with a loud click, and the next moment a light touch upon his arm caused him to look up suddenly.

At his side stood the little pale-faced Fan. She was evidently laboring under some excitement, and her hand trembled as it touched his sleeve.

He gazed upon her with astonishment, and would have spoken, but she raised her finger to silence him.

"Not a word," she whispered. "You must fly at once; follow me."

He started and turned his eyes upon the table. He hastily moved the papers and packages, but the pistol was gone.

"My father has taken it," she said, as Ross looked at her.

A fierce exclamation escaped him.

"He believes that he has you securely fastened in this room, without a possibility of escape, and he is now on the search for me and Meg. She declares that neither her life nor mine are safe in this miserable den. She has prevailed on me to leave it with her. But, Oscar, I would not leave it without I was in a position to know that you were released and safe away."

"I will go with you, Fan, and if your father comes near you to injure you—well, I'll teach him——"

"You will do all I ask and entreat of you?"

"I will do all that you direct me, except separate from you for ever," he exclaimed.

"Let us go," she said, hurriedly.

She led him to a small trap in the floor, which she noiselessly raised and descended. He followed her.

In the meantime, Hook, chuckling at having outwitted Ross, whom he believed to be securely imprisoned in his sanctum, directed his steps, as Fan had suggested, in search of old Meg.

There was a savage, murderous expression on his face, as with a noiseless step he glided along. He gripped the pistol, and proceeded cautiously to those rooms in one of which he expected to find Fan. He failed to discover her. He proceeded to her bedroom. The door was open—the bed was vacant. A strange feeling of misgiving took possession of him. He renewed with rapidity his search for her in other places where he believed she could be, but he nowhere met with her.

Soon he abandoned his search for her, and went to look for Meg. She, too, was not where he expected to find her. He increased his pace to a run. He called for her, he shouted her name; but a mocking echo alone replied.

Cold perspiration stood upon his forehead—a fear seized him. With gasping choking emotion, he rushed up to the room where he had confined Flora and Harold Burdell. That room was empty, too. It echoed the wild cries of amazement, rage and frantic terror, which burst from his lips. They were gone, fled, spirited away.

Frenzied, and breathing wild threats of vengeance, he repeated his examination of the room, but unsuc-

cessfully; and like a raging hyena he returned to his sanctum, to wreak some of his wild passion on Ross.

He opened the door cautiously, and then burst in with a fiendish yell of laughter, which had murder in its tones, to find his room vacant too.

With a desperate effort to regain his senses, he hunted in every corner where Ross could possibly have hidden himself—but in vain; and then, foaming at the mouth, he shrieked:

"Gone, too—all gone! My race is run—I am destroyed! My secrets are known. I shall hang—hang at Sing Sing, hang!"

His whole frame became convulsed; he writhed, twisted, dashed himself upon the floor, with all the horrible contortions of a dreadful fit.

CHAPTER XXIV.

No sooner did Grace's presence gratify Wilton Granger's eyes, than he commenced a more ardent course of attention; for she was now with him alone. He artfully drew her attention to himself; simulated acute anguish, and lamented his inability to wander out in the clear, fresh, sunny air. Grace looked at his pale face and fell into the trap.

She asked him if he had strength enough to take a short walk in the park. He caught at the suggestion with such delight, that she felt glad that she made the proposition.

This kindness of Grace's resulted in morning walks, in afternoon strolls, and as the days grew longer, in evening rambles.

But a day came when Wilton saw Grace leave the

house, and walk swiftly toward the woods. As she reached the edge of the pines, she clapped her hands three times. There was a short pause; and then there emerged from the deep woods a man. He advanced quickly toward her. She sank into his arms.

"My child!" he murmured, pressing her to his breast, and kissing her forehead. "My own, my beautiful child! The miseries of the past seem to fade in the contemplation of your dear features."

"Tell me of my mother, tell me who she was, and how I became separated from her at an age so young, that no remembrance of her obtains a place in my mind," urged Grace, with earnestness.

"You, Grace, our first-born, were stolen from us."

"Stolen from you?" echoed Grace, with surprise. "Why?"

"It is a secret not yet to be unfolded," he replied. "It was the first act in that drama in which my happiness was systematically destroyed."

"With what object?"

"That I have yet to learn; but the solution of the mystery can not be far off," he answered.

"You are, you have told me, a Montrose."

"I am," he replied.

"A near relative to Milroy Falcon?" she asked.

"A cousin," he replied.

"And my mother? was she not also a Montrose?"

"She was," he said. "It has been a prophecy existent from almost the earliest history of the family, that if a Montrose married a Montrose, he would be tied to sorrow; his love would prove fatal to his bride, and the source of intolerable misery to himself. There is no exception, in the history of the family, to the fulfillment of this accursed tradition. But I hope in a

short time to claim you as my daughter; then you may without fear acknowledge your love for one who is now stealing and lurking about, a mere wretched outcast, alone and friendless."

"Not friendless," cried Grace, quickly, "nor unloved —nor yet alone, if you would let me share your destiny with you."

"The time has not yet come, Grace," he returned, hurriedly; "but it shall come. But tell me, my child, how have you spent all your life at Falcon Manor, and with Mildred Dupont?"

"I have only been a short time at Falcon Manor, and with Mildred Dupont. Since I left my school-prison, I have been living with a man who claimed he was my father. He goes by the name of Oscar Ross."

"Oscar Ross!" thundered the father. "I must know more of this."

Grace related as briefly as possible the incidents connected with her removal from the wretched tenement in lower New York to the residence of Milroy Falcon, under the protection of Mildred Dupont.

"Do you tell me that Mildred Dupont was on friendly terms with the ruffian Ross?"

"She supplied him with money when he required it, and evidently possessed the greatest power over him. It was she who advanced the money which paid my school account; she who seemed at first to believe that he was my father; tried to induce me to believe it; and then assured me that he was not."

He seized Grace by the wrist. He said between his teeth:

"Grace, this woman, this Mildred Dupont, was your mother's dearest friend. She it was who first discov-

ered the secret meetings between my lost Grace and myself in the plantation of the black pines——"

Grace uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"She who contrived the secret plan of our union," he continued. "The mist which has so long clouded my vision is commencing to clear away. Now there dawns upon my mind a terrible fact. '*Anguis in herba*'! True to the tradition of the family, O Mildred Dupont, thou art the serpent which has stung me! Beware now of my fangs! It is terrible to think that I must still suffer you to remain in her power; but I have faith in you——"

"You may," she exclaimed.

"Keep hidden from her that you know of my existence," he continued. "She must not have the slightest suspicion that you have discovered yourself to be the daughter of the real Major Montrose."

"I will be cautious, you may be sure—I will guard the secret as my life," she returned.

"Events are slowly approaching to a crisis, that I can perceive," he said. "There will be a ruin and a desolation, but not where anticipated. I ask of you, Grace, to remain in your present position for a short time."

"Mildred Dupont has told me that I have a sister and a brother. You have not spoken of them."

"They are to me as you were until we met here—Hark! I hear footsteps. You shall know, as before, when I can meet you, and where."

He pressed a hasty kiss upon her forehead, and plunged into the woods and disappeared.

A footstep! Grace's heart beat quickly as she perceived, suddenly, a tall, rough-looking man, with a vil-

lainous-looking sinister aspect, steal through the alley made by the stumps of old trees.

In the meantime Wilton Granger had continued his progress, with a view of overtaking her.

"I must make one of the party," he muttered.

At this instant he found himself face to face with her.

"You appear to be fond of strolling in the woods, Miss Montrose," he said, with an easy nonchalant air.

The face of Grace assumed an expression ill-calculated to impress Wilton with a notion that he was making any advancement in her favor.

"What have I done, Mr. Granger, that you speak such words to me?"

"It is plain to me that you regard me with indifference, if not with positive aversion," he replied; "while I—oh, I love you passionately, Grace! I have at times fancied that my heart had been won by others, but believe me, until we met, I knew not the true sentiment of love—had never one feeling approaching the adoration I feel for you. I cannot rest, I——"

"Mr. Granger, it is ungenerous of you and ungentlemanly, to take advantage of my present position to address me in a language to which I decline to listen. You are the guest of Milroy Falcon; I must request him to protect me from such persecution as you are displaying toward me, unless you at once discontinue it. Let me pass, sir."

Awed in spite of himself by the dignity of her manner, he fell back, and she passed on. Unmolested by him, and not a little delighted to find that such was the case, Grace hastened on, taking now the direct path to the house.

As she passed a group of trees, some distance be-

yond where she had left Wilton, two men sprang from behind them and faced her. Sinking with terror she recognized in one Oscar Ross.

A faint scream burst from her lips, her sight appeared to leave her suddenly, and a dizziness to seize her. Then she felt herself lifted from the ground and borne swiftly away.

She remembered no more.

* * * * * *

Oscar Ross was startled to find on reaching the street in company with Fan, that after breathing an adjuration in his ear to fly by the most unfrequented streets to his own home, his companion had flitted from him and disappeared.

He gazed sharply around him, but she was gone—disappeared, he could not tell where or how. And so he sought his own abode.

To the place appointed to receive his letters, he went frequently to get the reply to the one he had sent to Mildred Dupont. It came not.

He dispatched another epistle to her. There was no delay in the response. It was returned in the envelope, in two halves, unread. He set his teeth, and his brow lowered.

"It has come to this, at last," he muttered. "I have feared to lose her, because she always supplied me with funds. I have cowered at her determined face, she shall cower at me now. My first move shall be to take Grace from her. She instructed me to act as her father; and, though I was always led to believe my own little one died in infancy, yet this girl may be that child. I will act as if she were. Grace is at Falcon Manor, walks in satins, and rides in carriages. She shall live with me here. I shall be a match for

her now. She may threaten self-destruction if I keep her close—and she may kill herself before I will set her free—and I will not let her go until I have gained my point with Mildred. I will see Whitney Burdell. Whew! that's a good thought. I have it. He shall help me. The likeness between Flora and Grace is remarkable. I will persuade the melon-headed gentleman that Grace is Flora; and that if we get her in our power, the boy is sure to become our prize. I shall consider that done."

When the shadows of night closed in, Fan paid Ross a visit.

"I have been so anxious to see you, Fan," he exclaimed.

"I presumed as much," she replied. "My father is actively employed in attempting to find us."

"Your father?"

"After leaving you I returned to his room——"

"But first tell me, Fan, did not the girl and boy accompany you in your flight?"

"I will tell you this much—I know more respecting them than you imagine—they have left my father."

"They will not be of much use to anybody in the shape of reward, unless certain papers be delivered up with them."

"Those of which you were robbed?"

He nodded.

"And which you claimed of my father?"

"The same."

"They are safe," she said.

He snapped his fingers with delight.

"I see it all," he cried. "You have them. Restore them to me——"

The door flew back with a violent bang. Both sprang from their mutual embrace, and beheld in the doorway Nan Lings, with her eyes like glowing coals, fastened upon Oscar Ross.

She rushed with uplifted knife at Fan, who crouched, shrieking with terror.

Ross's eyes caught the flashing glitter of the knife, and he sprang forward to meet her. He caught her

upraised arm in one hand, and passed the other round her waist. There was a desperate struggle for a minute; but his strength mastered hers, and he forced her to the floor. A moment more, and he wrenched the knife from her grasp. Then she fainted.

At first he thought she was dead. But she soon rallied, and springing to her feet, gasped: "Where is she?" catching up her knife, which lay upon the floor, and concealing it.

"Be silent, and listen to me, Nan. You are a goose. Do you not know who the girl is?"

"Hold, liar—wretch! I will not hear you!" shrieked Nan. "Where is she? She shall die, and I will perish with her! We cannot both live—we will die together, and by my hand."

As she spoke, she dashed out of the room, down the stairs, out of the house and away at a frantic speed after a receding object dimly discernible in the distance, closely followed by Oscar Ross.

The chase after Nan was not long continued. Ross soon overtook the frantic woman, clasped her tightly about the waist, and seizing the wrist of the hand which clutched the formidable knife, held it firmly until he could recover his breath to speak to her.

"Be calm, Nan, we must take matters coolly. To be plain, Nan, I am quite sure you do not suppose Swift Lane to be thinking of me, sitting with his hands in his pockets, under a tree."

"He is hunting for you in every direction, for he believes that you know where the boy and girl are."

"I did know," observed Ross, "but do not now; though I may, and soon, if you do not spoil all."

"I?" exclaimed Nan.

"Well, then there is sly Hook Flint, in hot search after me, anxious to display as much passionate affection for me as your brother Swift. There are others, too, who are equally desirous of obtaining an interview with me. They are approaching me from all points; that is why I have chosen a spot retired as this and why I wish to remain alone."

"Alone!"

"Precisely."

"I will never leave you more—I cannot, I will not! I would rather that you stab me and fling me into yonder river."

"You may and shall be near me, Nan, if you please, but not with me. There is a single apartment down the street to let. Being so late at night it will be a very good time to go and hire it for yourself."

"Be it so, I will obey you, but beware how you attempt to play me false; for if you do, though my heart would break the next moment, I should kill you."

He saw her installed in her room, and then left her for his own quarters.

* * * * * *

Shortly after, the absence of Grace was discovered. Servants with torches, and the whole house went out in search; but the servants would not enter the plantation of black pines.

Wilton indignantly vowed that he would go there alone; but Mildred calmly told him that she would accompany him.

A torch was kindled, and together they entered the dark alleys of the tall pines, leaving the servants in silent horror at the outskirts.

To Wilton the whole way, so carefully and with such evident knowledge threaded by Mildred, was a source of speculation and wonder. This feeling was heightened when she paused before the building covering the old crypt.

She silently pointed to the door, and passed within, followed by Wilton with the torch. She called Grace in a loud tone; a sullen echo alone answered.

She pointed to the descending stairs, and beckoned him to follow; he obeyed, and went slowly down after her.

As she reached the bottom stair she uttered a piercing shriek.

That instant the torch was wrenched from the grasp

of Wilton and extinguished, leaving him and his companion in the most intense darkness.

* * * * * *

We return now to another phase of our story.

Hook Flint returned to consciousness, after the mighty shock occasioned by a discovery which for a time had suspended life. He cowered to the floor in an intensity of abject despondency.

"They have all got away—they are gone—where? Can I not get at the secret?"

He gathered himself up as daylight penetrated into the dark house, and opened his store at the usual hour. He peered under his eyebrows at his first visitor, and uttered a grunt of satisfaction.

"What, Jesse Lings!" he exclaimed. "What brought you to New York?"

The man shook his head gloomily and said:

"My wife's run away from me, old Hook."

"What, with Oscar Ross?"

Jesse's chest heaved spasmodically.

"I believe you've hit the right nail on the head this time, old Hook; the last nail to be driven home in his coffin, and hers—hers! I'll tear her limb from limb when I catch her, and then I care not if I swing for the pair."

"Have you any clue to them?" asked Hook.

"None!" replied Jesse.

Hook suggested that he might carry his revenge too far, although he did hope in his heart that he would keep his word. However, he requested Jesse to go and call Swift Lane, in that he might give them the required advice, and, as he said, have no more to do with the matter which in no way personally affected or concerned him.

Jesse obeyed, and in a very few minutes returned with the giant gipsy, Swift Lane, whose eyes Hook quickly detected fastened upon him.

The first movement was to find Oscar Ross, and the three set about it as only such cunning crafty men know how. They tracked Ross to his abode. Night

came on. They knew Ross to be no butterfly, flying abroad in the sunshine; but they believed that he would issue forth in the dark, and they arranged to pounce upon him as he quitted his dwelling. Then, Hook, knowing Ross's desperate courage, was in hopes that he would be murdered by Swift Lane and Jesse; while he trusted to his own address to secure the best advantage from the circumstances to follow.

Hook, posted in the shadow of a house, became suddenly aware of the approaching figure of a female, who came forward as though she was a phantom. She passed close to where he crouched; and as she went by he gasped for breath. He saw her face—it was Fan!

Oh horror! one word, and she knew that she was in the tight grip of her father.

"Mine, Fan! mine—you are mine again!" he said, with intense vindictiveness in his tone. "Oh, but I'll punish you for this! I'll make you remember leaving a fond father——"

A voice growled in his ear:

"Release her! Release her! Attempt but to follow her, and your doom will be on your own head!"

"Aha! ha! Oscar Ross—Oscar Ross!" shouted Hook, and presented a pistol at him.

In an instant it was wrenched from him, Fan torn from his grasp, and a blow from the butt end of a pistol upon his head hurled him senseless into the gutter.

Ross saw approaching him, leaping and running, two men. A glance told him who they were. He set his teeth hard together—he could tell by the weight upon his arm that Fan had fainted. He lowered her on to the steps of the adjacent house, then leveled the pistol and fired. Swift Lane fell heavily to the ground. Ross then dashed up to Jesse Lings, and struck him a violent blow upon the skull, and felled him stunned to the earth.

Another minute, and he was fleeing away with Fan at a rapid pace, carrying her like a sleeping child in his arms. He turned down into a dark alley, and remained there until Fan was sufficiently recovered to proceed further. Ross did not deem it safe for Fan or himself

to return to their respective dwellings, so they got into a horse-car and rode to the extreme end of the city. Arrived at a low rambling house, Ross turned Fan over to the woman who answered his knock at the door, with strict orders to make her as comfortable as possible, while he went in search of the proprietor and accommodations for himself.

The next night, as he was on his way back to the city, he was felled to the ground.

CHAPTER XXV.

Oscar Ross was borne by six stalwart men, through unfrequented roads, for many nights, lying by during the day-time. Once, while they were resting, Nan—who had secretly dogged their steps—approached, and would have liberated him, but for the approach of one of his custodians. At length they arrived, with their prisoner, at the gipsy encampment. Here they found Swift Lane, who was about to have Ross hung, but was prevented by the timely appearance of old Mr. Burdell.

While these things were occurring, Fan—who had restored Flora and the boy to their father and sister Grace, the latter having been rescued from the ruffians by Roderick D'Olier and placed in the safe-keeping of her father—set out alone in search of the gipsies, with the purpose of endeavoring to save Ross.

Fan, upon arriving at the encampment, found that Swift Lane and his companions had determined to execute Ross; and were only kept at bay by Nan, who, with a poisoned dagger in her grasp, threatened to stab the first person who dared to lay hands on him. Old Mr. Burdell had in vain tried to persuade the men to forego their anxiously longed-for vengeance.

Ross seemed prepared to meet his doom. He imparted to Mr. Burdell all that he knew respecting Mildred Dupont and her machinations, and in a tremulous whisper, commended poor Fan to the old man's protection. At this instant Nan shrieked out:

"Beware—beware—they mean foul play!"

At this instant there were sudden and startling cries. A fox came dashing over the brow of the hill, down into the hollow. After him came rushing pell-mell a pack of yelling hounds. The whole place in an instant was in disorder. Ross saw his chance, and cried in a loud voice, while all the men stood for a moment as if changed into statues:

"Nan, cut these cords! Quick! quick!"

"Never!" shouted Jesse Lings, hoarsely. "I've sworn to have your life, and I'll have it!"

He flung himself upon Nan, wrested the knife out of her hand, and swinging round before Ross, raised his hand, and with desperate force aimed the dagger at his heart. Nan was too quick, however, for in that instant she sprang before Ross and received the blow.

It was delivered with such violence that it penetrated to her heart. A shriek, as she fell, was the only sound she uttered. She was dead almost as soon as she reached the ground.

Without waiting to measure the result of this unintended crime, Jesse Lings, not to be foiled, maddened by the intervention of Nan, sprang again at Ross with the knife he had never released from his grip, and struck him heavily with it on the breast.

At this moment horsemen, pursuing the hounds, appeared on the crest of the hill, and upon seeing them Jesse Lings turned and fled at his utmost speed, following the course the hounds had taken; but not until Mr. Burdell, who had witnessed with horror his double crime, discharged his pistol at him.

As the report of the pistol filled the glen with its echoes, Jesse Lings turned wildly around and disappeared over the hill.

Ross, like Nan, fell beneath Jesse Lings' blow, but he was not dead. Fan knelt down beside him, and supported his head against her breast.

"Where is Nan?" he asked.

"She lies here, but she is dead. The villain's blow was fatal on the instant," said Mr. Burdell.

"It is better so," murmured Ross. He gasped for

breath twice, then turning his face to Fan, he said, "I had much to say to you, but it must go unsaid, for I can tell by the coldness which is seizing me that I have but time for a few words. Fan, I believe you love me."

Oh, the agony with which she wept as those words fell upon her ears!

"Let it be a consolation to you, to know in the quiet, and I pray with my dying breath they may be peaceful and happy hours yet to come for you, that I loved you truly, purely, and in deep sincerity. I have been thankful and grateful for your love; and—closer—my voice—it is hard to speak—Mildred Dupont, see her, ask Mr. Burdell where to find her—tell her that she stung the hand that fed her—that the poison of her fang has done its work—that the creature she fashioned died with—with a curse——"

"No, no, no, Oscar—dear Oscar, pass not away with a curse upon your lips."

"Even as—you—you—will; tell her I died here—and thus—it will be enough."

He paused. The cold, clammy dew of death stood thickly on his forehead; he panted and gasped for breath.

"Fan!—Fan!" he whispered.

She bent her face down to his; she kissed his dying lips, and bent her ear to catch the last word. She heard faintly:

"Bless you—will bless you—I——"

A convulsive spasm passed over his frame, and she fell fainting upon his dead body.

CHAPTER XXVI.

It was a week after the happening of the fearful events of the last chapter, that Mildred Dupont was alone at Falcon Manor. One morning she was informed that a young girl desired to have an interview with her. She ordered that the stranger be admitted. A pale, heart-weary girl came in.

"I am Fan Flint," she exclaimed, in a low tone. "I have much to say to you, madame, of grave importance, in which you are personally and deeply interested. Will you please listen to me?"

"One moment," Mildred interposed. "Are you the daughter of Hook Flint?"

"Of him, madame, whom you have employed, and who is now in prison," replied Fan.

"In prison!" faltered Mildred.

"Under your instruction, he endeavored to abduct the son of Mr. Burdell Montrose; but he was detected, and, with a companion, captured. He was fully committed for trial on the day of his examination; and the sessions of the criminal court being on, he was tried at once, and sentenced to penal servitude for twenty years. Officers have taken possession of his property, and it is all confiscated to the State. It is not, however, to speak of him that I came to you. I have a mission to you from one who—is—who—is dead."

"Who?" Mildred gasped.

"Roland Montrose," replied Fan.

Mildred sat as rigid as a marble figure.

"To the tender interest displayed in me by Grace and Flora Montrose you may attribute this revelation being made through my lips. Old grandfather Burdell Falcon was with me when Oscar was killed."

She handed a note to Mildred, who shook her head, and in a voice of indistinct articulation, said:

"Read it."

Fan opened it, and read in a subdued, voice:

"MAJOR MONTROSE'S DAUGHTER AND SON:—Do not ask why you doomed them all to the years of acute misery. They ask not why you should have played the terrible part, appearing in the family only once in a century, and known to it as '*Anguis in herba*'; they only wish you to depart from Falcon Manor."

"Tell me of him who has perished, now—conceal nothing—I would know all."

When Fan came to the last moments of Oscar, and

repeated the words he had used, together with her own intervention, Mildred slid from her seat, burying her face in her hands and weeping bitterly; then she rose up and said to Fan:

"Remain here until the morning, I entreat you. I will then give you an answer, in writing, to the communication you have brought to me."

Mildred then hastened out of the room. That night, as Fan was about to retire to rest, Mildred appeared in her room. She placed in her hands a paper.

"It is for Milroy Falcon. Give it into his hands and no other's." She then handed to her another paper. "It is my will," she said. "I bequeath to you all I die possessed of. It is in accordance with the wishes of him whom I loved no less than yourself, but whom I ruined, while you faithfully served him. Not a word more."

She left the room, staggering rather than walking.

Far in the night Fan saw that the plantation of the black pines was on fire! She dressed herself hastily, secured her papers, and made her way to the depot. She took the first train to New York, and when she arrived, she communicated to Major Montrose what had happened, and he with Milroy Falcon hurried to the scene of disaster. The house was saved, but the whole of the plantation of the black pines was in ashes. The building covering the crypt was a charred mass of ruin and devastation. Nowhere was there a trace of Mildred Dupont. Her letter to Milroy Falcon was opened and read to the family. It ran thus:

"Milroy, when you have read these lines destroy them, and with them will perish the last evidence of the existence of one who is not worthy one thought. For the wrong I have done I dare not ask forgiveness, for I have no atonement to make. I was left an orphan at an early age, but old enough to comprehend the tutelage given to me by a father previous to his own self-destruction—he having not the courage to survive inevitable discovery of the great crime he had perpetrated. 'You will be received in the family of a relative,' he said. 'You will be dependent. Hate those who give you bread, as they would the animals they would keep out of sentiment! You will be so kept, fed, and treated.' I have played the part. The blow I would have inflicted on all has

fallen on myself and crushed me. I would if I could undo the past. I will avert future evil from you and all those connected with you. The black pines shall be destroyed by the hand of your enemy! and there I will perish with them."

Milroy Falcon refused to remain in possession of Falcon Manor. The papers which Fan had given up proved the title and deed vested in Major Montrose, Grace's father. A handsome income was allotted to Milroy Falcon. Grace bestowed her hand upon Roderick D'Olier. Flora and Harold made their new-found father's home bright for many years.

And there was a young gentleman, who, believing Dottie Burdell to be the loveliest of her sex, resolved to make her his queen. Ora D'Olier married a young millionaire, who proved a devoted lover and husband. Wilton Granger disappeared so that he might get clear of the consequences of his ill-doings.

Poor Fan! She did not repine at inevitable destiny, but her heart lay buried with Oscar Ross, her first love and her last. She placed poor Meg beyond the reach of want or injury. And so, having done all, she left the fortune Mildred Dupont had bequeathed to her to a noble charity, with strict injunctions that she should be laid by the side of Oscar Ross when she died. Poor Fan, one fair day, she having been gradually sinking, smiled sweetly on Grace and Flora, who were kneeling at her side, and breathing the name of Oscar, soft and low, turned her face to the wall, and, as an infant passing into slumber, so died, having done in her life more good than there had evil been done by "MILDRED DUPONT."

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